

## Article

# University as a Site to Learn Citizenship from the Perspectives of Students in the UK

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**Abstract:** The role of universities in preparing students to be active citizens within civil society has gained increasing attention. However, only limited research has been conducted on students' views of universities as sites to learn representative democracy. To address the research gap, this article conducts eight semi-structured interviews with staff, student leaders and students without any positions in a case university. The students are undergraduate and post-graduate from different academic majors. Community of practice theory is employed to help understand students' views of their experiences of representative democracy at the university. After analysing the interview data, the article finds that student leaders regard their role as mainly representing students and that all students in the study realise the importance of such democratic representation through participation. Importantly, through participation in representative democracy, students, especially student leaders, gain knowledge and skills on voting and elections. Interestingly, students' sense of belonging is a result of participation in student union, society and club activities, which very likely includes voting and engagement with elections. Learning and belongingness are likely to make students participate more in future democratic representation activities. Although students give credit to the university's role in promoting representative democracy, there are challenges. Specifically, the university is supposed to promote more participation in voting and elections for first-year students, and there is also concern that the short-term nature of positions in the student union may not allow real changes to be made. The findings shed some light on how students learn representative democracy in universities in neoliberal countries.

**Keywords:** representative democracy; higher education; community of practice; learning process; belongingness


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## 1. Introduction

Democracy can improve the quality of governing and enable government to promote the agenda of economic, social and environment sustainability. Meanwhile, lower participation in democracy results in economic and social imbalances. For example, lower youth voter turnout means the underrepresentation and, thus, inequality of social needs, which undermines the sustainability of future society. Secondly, education has been a pillar of the 2030 Framework for Sustainable Development as an inclusive vision of humanity that promotes well-being, justice and peace for all, and a sustainable relationship with the environment [1]. Education is also widely recognised by governments and civil society organisations as a key factor in making progress towards desired development outcomes, developing skills and competencies for supporting participatory and democratic citizenship [1]. Higher education (HE) has been regarded as having three principal roles—intellectual development, preparing students for the labour market and preparing students for living in a society [2,3]. Many scholars argue that HE is a very significant setting for the promotion of democracy, including the importance of social change and

justice, as well as empowering people [3–5]. Therefore, promoting democracy in higher education can prepare students to be active citizens with the knowledge and competencies to build a sustainable future. From this perspective, HE needs to make an effort to help students prepare to be active citizens within a civil society. Of particular relevance to this paper, Boland [6] claims that higher education has played an important role in the democratic socialisation process, and participation in shared governance provides a significant opportunity to address democratic fatigue and to contribute to the preparation of students for their future roles as democratic citizens and as members of civil society. Yang and Hoskins [7] found that HE has a positive effect on young people's voting intentions in England. In view of the preceding research, it is important to explore universities as sites for students to learn representative democracy.

Many studies have paid attention to student union and sabbatical officers in universities. Several studies claim that the shift towards professionalisation in the work and actions of student unions has led to a more general depoliticisation of unions and their student bodies [8,9]. Kouba [10] explores the determinants of students voting in academic senate elections and finds a standard rational choice model of turnout for elections to political offices to be appropriate for explaining student turnout in the Czech Republic. Brooks et al. [11] focus on student unions' changing role in student political engagement. A much greater emphasis is placed on representation in the role and function of the students' union. Raaper [12] explores political subjectivity from the perspectives of sabbatical officers from English students' unions. The author argues that professional interactions in the experience of sabbatical officers can shape their political subjectivity and that this professional approach has tended to employ more professional staff in students' unions. These studies focus on students who held positions in student unions, with an absence of the perspective of non-student leaders.

Several studies have highlighted the role that higher education institutions (HEIs) often play in the development of political identities and political groups. Harris [13] argues that campuses are important places that bring together people with different perspectives and facilitate encounters with difference, and they can be "micro-publics" where students can embrace diversity and build new solidarities. Similarly, Crossley and Ibrahim [14] argue that universities can play a key role in developing students' political participation by bringing together students with similar perspectives to form political networks, and providing facilities and resources to support these emerging networks. Loader et al. [15] contend that the impact of universities in fostering political identity is most obvious in small student organisations that provide a relatively safe environment for students to promote their habitus as student citizens.

However, a number of researchers hold different views on the impact of HE on students' political participation. Some scholars believe that campuses tend to reproduce the divisions evident in the wider society rather than bringing people from different cultures together to form new political alliances (e.g., [16]), with relationships between students on campus tending to be individualistic rather than sharing collective values. Moreover, some campus networks may exert a negative influence on students' political debate and engagement [11,17]. Squire [18] explores how "working-class student officers" in students' unions at elite UK universities deal with their classed identities.

Some studies compare students' views of political actors or civic responsibilities among the UK and other countries. Abrahams and Brooks [19] compare how likely students identify themselves as political actors and how their political activity is seen in policy texts in England and Ireland. Brooks et al. [20] compare students, higher education staff and policymakers from six European countries, and explore their views of students as political actors.

Although there are many studies exploring how student unions and officers work in universities, few have discussed students' experience of participation in university organisations and activities as a learning process from the perspectives of student leaders and non-student leaders. Therefore, there is a lack of studies that explore students' experiences

of and practices of democracy in HE. As one of the roles of higher education is to cultivate citizens for democratic society, it is important for researchers to understand how universities could be sites for students to learn representative democracy, especially through citizenship practices on campus. A large body of studies show that previously different European higher education systems are moving toward an Anglo-American model, since the Bologna reforms and the creation of a European Higher Education Area [21]. Although our study has an English context, it is likely to shed some light on how students learn representative democracy in universities in neoliberal countries. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how students learn representative democracy in universities and whether the university is a site for them to learn from the perspective of students.

This article first discusses the concept and theory of representative democracy and community of practice (CoP). It then describes the qualitative methods and participants. This is followed by findings from the study on the following: belongingness, democratic representation, change and influence, learning and university encouragement. The last two sections present the discussion and conclude the article.

### *The English Higher Education Context*

Neoliberalism is a distinct political and economic rationale in Western public policy that tends to privatise public sector services and views citizens as consumers [22]. Since 2012, consumerism has been prevalent with the radical changes to HE funding in England (raising tuition fees up to GBP 9000 per annum). The Higher Education Reform Act of 2017 (HERA 2017), the most recent reform of higher education in England, encourages the further marketisation of universities. In the UK higher education context, the neoliberal policy has influenced a wide range of regimes; for example, various quality assurance activities such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the National Student Survey (NSS), and the recent Teaching Excellence Framework. Furthermore, the policy-making process in HE has changed, involving a wide range of stakeholders such as educational institutions, think tanks and entrepreneurial agencies [23], as well as student groups [24].

Therefore, HE has moved towards marketisation and the marketed rationality has dominated various areas of university life, from classroom teaching, student–staff relations to culture and student life. Consequently, competitive individualism becomes “a core attribute of citizenship that continually reshapes the entrepreneur” (p. 9), with student life moving towards pursuing self-interest and acquisition [25]. In this market-based system, HE students are increasingly regarded as consumers in the UK [11]. This is the case in many policy statements from central government and individual universities [26,27]. In this system, universities need to consult with students about educational practices, standards and outcomes to meet their expectations [28,29]. This obviously involves students and their organisations participating in the policy consultation [12]. While student voice plays a central role in education policy [30], many studies argue that marketised HEIs tend to restrict students’ political participation by allowing them to act as “consumers” and focusing only on limited education-related issues (e.g., [19]). This study thus explores how students both participate in and learn democracy in universities.

## **2. Theory**

### *2.1. Representative Democracy*

Representative democracy is a type of democracy in which all eligible citizens elect representatives to establish laws and legislation for them. It permits the broadest participation of the majority of citizens in selecting representatives who make political decisions that affect the entire community [31]. Based on the principle of elected individuals representing the people, representative democracy is the most common form of democracy in established Western societies [32]. Representative democracy is very important in maintaining the democratic process. Actions including “voting, standing as candidates for elections and contacting members of parliament are necessary to maintain the democratic system and

to keep in place laws that are just” [33] (p 10). However, as recorded in the Democracy Index in recent years, democracy has not been in robust health for some years. For example, citizens increasingly feel unrepresented and their trust in politicians, political parties and political institutions continues to decline [34,35]. In 2020, representative democracy was further tested by the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Specifically, there is inequality in the groups of people who participate in elections, as it is the educated and wealthy who vote more, and as a consequence it is the elite who tend to have a greater say [31]. Thus, this calls in to question the extent to which the democratic system is truly representative of the people [31]. The low voter turnout of young people in most countries is a danger for democracy to flourish. The UK situation is especially the case. The voter turnout of young people (47%) in the 2019 general election in the UK was only about 60% that of older citizens (more than 70%) [36], which means young people are not properly represented. The difference in the level of participation between younger and older generations is exacerbated by the declining numbers of young people and the reduced opportunities for young people in employment, education, health and secure retirement [37]. In such situations, the younger generation needs to become more politically active in order to avoid losing some of the benefits held by the older generation [33]. Therefore, the need to encourage young people to participate in representative democracy and help them to learn representation democracy is especially compelling today. The purpose of this article is to understand the extent to which universities can serve as sites for the promotion of representative democracy, according to the perspectives of university students.

## 2.2. *Theory of Community of Practice*

This article considers an explanation centred on understanding students’ perspective of a university as a site to learn representative democracy. Although democracy remains complex, the keys to promoting democracy are participation and human interaction. The theory of CoP focuses on learning knowledge and skills through participation and constructing identity. As researchers seek explanations for learning representative democracy from an informal learning perspective, constructive learning theory is applied in the article.

We choose to use CoP theory as our guiding theoretical framework because it refers to a group of individuals expanding their knowledge and promoting skills by practising and forming their identity in the community [38,39]. CoP is understood in this article as individuals participating in community activities and gradually constructing their shared identity and gaining knowledge and skills of representative democracy through this participation. In this sense, students vote and engage in representation activities and create their identity as full members through which they learn representative democracy.

Wenger [38] proposes integral learning as legitimate peripheral participation, which entails the progressive involvement from an outsider to an insider in which a novice enters a community at the periphery and gradually approaches full, legitimate participation as they gain increasing competence in their practice. During this process, participants develop different learning pathways and identities and various forms of membership [40]. Membership in a CoP can also translate into an identity as a form of competence [38]. In this way, students participate in voting and elections and construct an identity. Their membership in university organisations also forms their identity at the university. At universities, participation in representative democracy may differ among students. Importantly, different degrees of participation can lead to different identities. This permeable periphery provides novices with the opportunity to learn the practice in reality, while core members can acquire new ideas to enrich existing knowledge and reflect on their practice [41,42]. How can first-year students become full members of their university? The newcomer or peripheral member is not regarded as “a (passive) recipient of codified knowledge made available through formal instruction; rather the ‘curriculum’ is available to newcomers through their increasing participation (with others) in the relevant and inevitably structured social practices (activities, tasks, habits) of the community” [43] (p. 19).

As the purpose is to explore universities as sites for young people to learn representative democracy in an informal way, it is appropriate to understand this based on the CoP discussed above. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do university students view their experience of representative democracy on campus?
2. What do they gain from their experience on campus?
3. To what extent can a university be a site for students to learn representative democracy?

### 3. Materials and Methods

In order “to better understand the nature of (students’) experiences” at universities [44] (p 327), we use a qualitative method to understand the depth and complexity of student participation in university organisations and activities and to explore how and what individuals gain from participation. Specifically, we used interviews to collect data as they could extract a rich source of information and explanations from individuals about their experience, feelings, attitudes and values [45].

The snowball sampling method was used [46]. The article is based on interview data collected during the 2015–16 academic year within a large research-led institution located in England. Both elected members and sabbatical officers in the students’ union in the institution were invited to participate in the research via email. The participants were invited to recommend other students with certain characteristics to participate in the study. In addition, students were contacted at the university cafeteria via information sheets and invited to the interviews. In total, eight participants volunteered to participate in the study, with some demographic information of these participants shown in Table 1. The research seeks to explore the perceptions of the wider university community, including individuals with or without a students’ union officer role.

**Table 1.** Summary of interview subjects’ information.

Participant	Gender	Major	Role
P1	Female	Science	Student leader in student union
P2	Female	Humanities	Sabbatical officer
P3	Male	Social science	Undergraduate student
P4	Male	Social science	Student leader in student union
P5	Male	Science	Postgraduate student
P6	Female	Social science	Student councillor and course representative
P7	Female	Science	Undergraduate Student
P8	Female	Science	Undergraduate Student

A semi-structured interview technique was used in this study. The interview included 15 main questions and each interview lasted approximately 50 min. These questions focused upon interviewees’ experiences of representative democracy at the university, their views on active citizenship and their involvement and opinions on the university’s and the student union’s performance.

#### Data Analysis

The data were analysed adopting the constant comparative method [47]. In the constant comparative method, new information from respondents’ responses is compared with previous codes; that is, constant comparisons are made. If the new information does not fit under a previous code, a new code is established. Thus, first, we conducted a line-by-line analysis of the data to generate initial codes. After beginning the initial coding, researchers met and discussed the codes and came to a consensus.



After the data were imported into NVivo, the codes were created and added to the data line by line in each case. The participants were divided into different subgroups based on whether they held a position at the university. Different parts of the interviews were compared within each interview to ensure their consistency. Similar codes were then combined to form categories and subcategories. These categories were also compared within subgroups, with themes then developed based on the interface of each category. The themes between subgroups were compared to give as full of a picture as possible of representative democracy at the university according to the constant comparative method [48].

#### 4. Results

Through an inductive analysis of the transcripts of the interview data, the following themes emerged: (a) belongingness, (b) democratic representation, (c) change and influence, (d) learning and (e) university encouragement.

##### 4.1. Belongingness

A major theme to emerge from the analysis of the interviews was the sense of “belongingness”. All participants described belongingness from a general perspective, including their experience of participation in all activities and organisations rather than voting and elections specifically. For these students, belongingness was a result of their involvement in a range of university organisations including student unions and societies. One of the participants said that “(taking part in) society definitely makes me feel included in the university”. (P3)

A number of participants discussed belongingness as a function of their membership in organisations. One of the participants described the feeling as follows:

“... being part of society, (being part of) a few of them can make me feel more a part of university, and you actually do something about it.” (P7)

From the interviews, participants were able to contrast not participating and participating in university life and explained that the latter led to a greater sense of attachment to the university. Even participants who were not involved admitted that a lack of participation in many organisations tended to make them feel that they were still a part of university but “not as much as other people”. (P8)

These excerpts indicate participation in university activities and organisations may produce a sense of belongingness for students. A higher level of participation on campus is likely to produce a greater sense of attachment.

Coupled with belongingness were feelings of attachment to the university. For students, this typically came as a result of freely giving their time. One student reflected the views of many in that through volunteering, she felt more attached to her university. She said: “The more you volunteer, the closer you feel to the university.” (P1)

Some, especially the group without a position, admitted that their role in university life was “small” but that their participation in a “few things” generated a sense of attachment to their university.

This involvement also led to feelings of ownership, as in the following indicative statement:

“You put in a lot of effort to make it better, and (you) suddenly feel you have some ownership of your organisation because you have changed or improved it.” (P1)

These excerpts show volunteering, especially for students without positions, is an important source to construct their identity. In summary, these interviews clearly indicate that participation in organisations and volunteering can produce a sense of belongingness.

The following themes are more specifically related to representative democracy.

##### 4.2. Democratic Representation

We started the interview by asking how participants understood citizenship and democracy. Democratic representation was mostly mentioned.

Student leaders regarded their role as mainly representing students, and such democratic representation was featured within the participant interviews. Such representation, in their minds, was of considerable importance for a number of reasons:

“Representations actually are that your views are not your own, but representing a large number of people there for you. You need to be able to understand what they want, not just what you personally want, so (I am) standing for the people basically.” (P1)

These thoughts are similar to previous studies suggesting that the role of student leaders is moving towards to representation while other democratic activities, for example, protesting, are less emphasised.

Both groups of participants believed in the importance of voting as a democratic process. The following remark from one student leader was indicative of the consequence of not voting:

“I think if you do not vote, you just let everyone else decide for you who you want to be in power.” (P1)

Another student also referred to the importance of voting in relation to recent changes in university finance:

“(If) everyone like you didn’t vote, that means the whole student body will just be completely ignored, especially with student fees at the moment.” (P3)

There was also an agreement that voting was the appropriate tool to choose the right candidate who would represent them. One participant stated the following:

“It (students’ union) does a lot to represent us. For that reason, I want to be involved in deciding who should represent us really.” (P4)

Student leaders offered accounts of their democratic experiences in the students’ union, which were largely located within the many student meetings and committees. There was a general consensus among participants that democracy “works” in the university.

These excerpts show that voting is a basic and important part of democracy, which can work on campus.

References to the voting process appeared frequently in interviews. Both groups of participants saw the appropriate democratic election process as a means of democratic representation on campus. One participant described the voting process:

“I thought that through manifestos, (hearing) people on the radio, being involved in debates cause you could ask questions in the debates, it is a good opportunity to find out who would be good for this role, and I trusted from that kind of exposure they are the best people to choose.” (P2)

Furthermore, some student leaders explained how important it was for them to be elected democratically:

“I have been voted in by a few thousand students, which is quite important to me though. I was voted in properly . . . Within the role, we make a lot of decisions with a lot of people. The decisions in fact are made by 23,000 students in the university. That is quite a big role to fill.” (P2)

They also stated that democracy is at the heart of everything they do within their roles. These excerpts indicate that an appropriate and complete election process legitimates the role of leaders, which are very important for democracy.

In summary, voting and elections are the core of democracy on campus, which helps students understand representation and democracy.

#### 4.3. Change and Influence

A further theme emerged from an analysis of the interview transcripts related to “change and influence”. Specifically, all participants saw themselves as change agents with

regard to voting, volunteering or other engagement. Students made reference to this notion of “change” from different perspectives:

“(I participated) because I saw things needed to be changed. I saw the person who did that job before me and I want to do better than that. I want other people to see how it is important to me, to see that I could make a difference if given a chance.” (P1)

“I think again (participation is) to show what they believe and make some sorts of change.” (P7)

Interviewees also related participation as contributing to organisations and society and providing help:

“(My participation is a) kind of help for them as well. It is kind of giving advice to people and telling them what my experience was.” (P3)

“I personally think so because it not only benefits you but also benefits other people.” (P4)

Much attention was given to voice as a means to initiate change in activities and organisations. A student explained the following:

“But I see that with the bodies like student unions that you have a say that has quite a significant effect on what happens.” (P3)

Similarly, Participant 4 reported the following:

“I could voice them, not just mine . . . So it is kind of being a voice of the committee to understand my and other points of view.” (P4)

In addition to a sense of achieving change, participants with positions also saw their motivation to participate as a way to exert “influence”, as the following extracts illustrate:

“The main motivation is that because I was elected into this role, I would like to think I have a lot of impact and make a lot of changes.” (P2)

“It is really nice to be involved in meetings at that level and be able to influence the direction of the union to whether we agree on the line.” (P4)

These excerpts indicate that students can make changes through their participation in student organisation and volunteering, and knowing this can be a motivation for them to participate in activities.

However, some participants not holding any positions believed in collective influence rather than what a single person could influence. An interviewee explained his/her views of the influence on the university in the following remark:

“Actually, on the individual bases, NO, I don’t . . . I mean if I suppose that if I shouted loud enough, I would hope something will be heard. As a collective we are, of course, you have a conflict of opinion. Half of them want one way, and of course the other half might say no, we don’t want that way.” (P3)

However, one participant thought voting did not matter from a realistic perspective, which is an uncommon view among the data:

“From an economic view, no, it absolutely has no difference if I voted or not. But if everyone took that opinion, took that stand, no one would vote. But they really know my vote does not make any difference, but possibly, me voting encouraged other people to vote, and the fact I ran definitely made a difference. If I didn’t run, someone else would be in the position, and that definitely affects the things that do happen. Realistically, no, it doesn’t matter if I voted or not, but I think we have the responsibility to vote.” (P4)

The data show that students, to some extent, are concerned with individual influences in voting and democracy, but they weight more on collective influences. This shows they



expect the collective action to make a difference, which means student organisations and unions could play a more important role in making changes.

#### 4.4. Learning

Participation in university life was deemed to be a learning process by participants, and this led to a range of claimed benefits for them. As a function of their active participation, interviewees, especially student leaders, drew attention to a range of skills including leadership, communication, organisational skills and the ability to manage time well. One participant offered some examples:

“All the host skills that I have developed definitely help me personally like I say. Communication skills are a big one, and (to) be able to organise, and lead teams as well . . . the whole stuff, skills.” (P4)

Participants explained what they had learned through involvement in the voting process. A leader thought voting was a step to being an active citizen:

“I am actively involved, and I do care about the way things move. I think voting is a small step to be even more involved. If people don’t take this step to vote, they are unlikely to take the next few steps as well.” (P4)

Several student leaders referred to a contrast between voting and not voting in the students’ union: “I will not feel so strongly about the importance of voting if I have not seen how important it is within the student union to get the right people in at the top.” Although participants recognised the difference between voting in a national election and in a student union election, they thought they could still learn from voting on a university campus. Participants’ views of learning are indicated in the following remarks:

“I think hopefully that (voting in the students’ union) really makes people understand the voting process because it is a much smaller scale here. So, you get to understand how it works, and you can see it on a bigger scale in the whole country.” (P1)

“Voting is an experience you can learn and reflect upon. You can learn what you want or what you don’t want, which you can take elsewhere . . . Maybe a general election is on a much larger scale, but the principle is the same. It is just putting the student (in the place of) everyone. Obviously not everyone (every student) participates in (the students’ union), but those who do I think can learn the idea behind it.” (P5)

Participants in both groups claimed they gained confidence through participation. A number of participants believed “participating now (at the university) gives people confidence to participate in a big world later”.

Many were therefore of the opinion that “university is the best place to start participating”. They also thought they would continue participating if they had been involved in the university. A student leader claimed she would continue to vote “from the democratic view, I definitely will (vote). I would vote again” (P2). One participant said: “I always wanted to be involved in the university, and (there is a) chance (that) when I leave, I will always want to be involved in society possibly.” (P4)

Additionally, participants believed participation helped their development from a social perspective. Specifically, one participant thought they built relationships through being involved:

“For me, I benefit a lot from participating. It is just not your year group. You have such a mixture of people. It is so worth participating.” (P3)

However, only one student leader expressed concerns with voting in the union and the general election. She thought voting in the union was not particularly related to voting in a national election:

“We as an institution, although we are trying to reach out to the local community, we have very little connection with them . . . I feel like voting in the general election is a little more to do with the local community, being involved in the local community, what is around you and what is in your life, like that. I do not know they will get that through the SUSU.” (P2)

This critical view is a rarity among participants.

The data based on learning representation democracy in universities show that students can acquire knowledge about democracy and gain a set of democratic skills through participation in university elections and activities, including leadership, communication, organisational, time-management skills and self-confidence. Likewise, the knowledge and skills might help them perform well in democratic society. These excerpts show that students experience a learning process of representative democracy in universities.

#### 4.5. University Encouragement

Interviewees evaluated the performance of the university and the student union in promoting student participation and provided suggestions to enhance future participation.

All students gave credit to the university’s performance in encouraging students to participate in organisations and activities in terms of opportunities and accessibility.

It was also noted that the student organisations continued to improve the promotion of student participation in different ways:

“The student union this year is running a campaign to try to promote voting, so they actually have a big discussion on campus where different political leaders are coming, and having this event makes people understand more. In addition, there is lots of information on campus teaching students to do that more.” (P1)

“The student union I think actually is quite filled with different ideas; it looks like it is well sustained. They have a good committee board, real variety. They do work.” (P3)

However, some participants, most of whom held positions, also mentioned the limitations of the university in promoting student participation. Some argued that first-year students were not well motivated. There was a view that short-term positions in student unions may not lead to significant change or improvement. Additionally, it was felt that the university did not have enough connection with the outside world. For example, a leader expressed the following concern:

“University students and local people stay relatively separate. We as an institution, although we are trying to reach out to local community, we have very little connection with them.” (P2)

More active citizenship thinking or culture should be promoted on the campus, according to a leader:

“Everyone benefits everyone by making efforts and being a good citizen. The university could promote more of that sort of thinking.” (P2)

In addition, some participants in both groups believed that if the university did more in the first few weeks of the year, it would help students participate. One student believed the following:

“So maybe if they promoted that a bit more, especially the first weeks when everyone basically is trying to find out what they can do and trying to decide what they will do.” (P7)

Possibilities for student involvement were also proposed. Several participants suggested making more use of online platforms and local radio stations.

However, many participants also claimed participation was a personal choice:

“So, I think it is really important to participate, but that (participation) is down to a person’s opinion.” (P3)

Some thought the degree of participation was potentially linked to their academic major at the university:

“I think sometimes it depends on your degree. People involved in more like humanities and subjects that relate to global society and humans, I think they are more likely to get involved. I have friends in medicine. Basically, they hardly get involved in anything. Generally, it depends on what degree you do and how much you want to get involved. In addition, math students do not get involved in anything.” (P1)

In summary, students have recognised the efforts of their university and union to promote student participation in university organisations and activities. However, several statements from the participants show that the university needs to provide a better experience in participation and make more connections with the local community and society. In addition, some students believe participation is an individual choice. This shows the neoliberal influence in the university. This tendency could lead to more focus on freedom rather than students’ responsibility in democracy, therefore reducing their participation in democracy.

## 5. Discussion

The interview results show that representative democracy is a very important issue for both student leaders and those not holding any positions. By participating in voting and elections, participants realise their importance and meaning. This finding is in line with the work of Brooks et al. [11], who believe that representation is the main role of student unions. Their study only focused on student leaders in the students’ union, so a distinct difference is that this study sought the perspectives of students who did not hold elected positions within the case university. The findings in this study support the theory that mutual recognition can be built during mutual engagement and interaction [38]. Students shared information, communicated with candidates and participated in voting and elections, which made them realise the importance of representative democracy. Furthermore, students, especially leaders in this study, believe that democracy works, while other students claim that the election process, which includes sharing information, communicating with candidates and then choosing the right candidates to represent them, is democratic. It can be seen as a social learning process, including interacting and sharing, through which they are able to learn more about voting and elections.

The findings indicate that all participants considered themselves as change agents with regard to voting, while student leaders also mentioned change with being elected. In addition to a sense of achieving change, participants with positions also saw their motivation to participate as a way to exert “influence”. In CoP, the “competence” of a community is built by both the participants and community, which includes the negotiation of a “joint enterprise” [38]. The negotiation between active members or full members and the demands of the community leads to relationships of mutual accountability, which makes full participants accountable and always seeks to make the community better. The community in the CoP included three elements: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. According to the data, universities can be such communities. Students in this study mentioned that they participate in the university, share information and build relationships through engagement. Students also sought to negotiate between themselves and other students, and between their personal ability and the needs and the demands of the university, which made them accountable to the university. They participated in representative democracy and saw themselves as change agents seeking to make the university a better place. The students who ran in elections even negotiated with staff and sought to use their own ability to change the university. For actively involved students, the university can provide them with more opportunities to participate in decision-making of university issues, including various committees ranging from academic issues to management issues. Furthermore, the university can support students to organise discussions and meetings on university issues for all students. Communities can also

provide opportunities for students to interact with local and national organisations. Local councils can offer students places to take part in decision-making meetings.

Participation as learning is another important finding in this study. Through participation in representative democracy, students—and especially student leaders—gained knowledge and skills on voting and elections. This is consistent with McCowan's [49] study on teaching citizenship in HE, in that learning citizenship through civic action is necessary for citizenship education. Theoretically, full members of a community are able to experience the "world" and improve the competence of the community. Participation in social communities shapes both people's experience and the communities they are in [38]. The process of realignment of meaningful experience and competence is an obvious part of learning that produces knowledge and skills. Students actively engaging in voting and elections and taking the process seriously in the study learned both knowledge and skills relating to representative democracy. However, the depth of knowledge and scale of skills could quite likely differ between leaders and other students. For example, leaders who have run in elections appear to gain more experience related to the election process than those without similar experience. Given the qualitative data in this study, this raises the question as to whether students who participated in voting and elections at the university will continue and vote in national elections. According to the data, students clearly stated their intention to participate in future national elections. Apart from university elections, local and national governments can involve students in local and national electoral processes, so that students can experience the process of national representative democracy.

The notion of "belongingness" is a very interesting finding from the analysis. All students described their belongingness to the university community from a broad perspective. They said that their belongingness was a result of their participation in all activities and organisations, which very likely included voting and engagement with elections. According to CoP, students actively participated in voting and organisations, and identity was constructed during the process where students read manifestos, talked with candidates and peers and then voted for their preferred candidate. Membership of university organisations also form the identity of active participants, which makes an individual an insider and a full participant/member. During this process, they learn representative democracy. Another important aspect is that the identity of full members or active participants gained through their engagement can be carried with them and make them more inclined to vote in future elections. However, some students said they felt this belongingness less than others because they participated much less. Their identity was likely to be a combination of participation and non-participation, which makes them peripheral participants/members in the community.

A further finding was that students thought that their university performed well in encouraging students to participate in voting and elections. Participation in the university shapes students' experience and the university itself. According to the interviewees, they and the university made efforts to build a "repertoire" [38] (p 73) by running campaigns to promote voting in national elections. However, the interviewees thought there were also limitations. The university is supposed to promote more participation in voting and elections among first-year students. These new entrants need more interaction and help to become a more established member of the community and then learn from this experience. Furthermore, the results suggest more citizenship knowledge and culture should be promoted on campus. Therefore, the university can provide lectures and seminars on democratic knowledge, which help students relate university elections with national elections and acquire citizenship knowledge. In addition, the university can support student groups to engage in mock national election campaigns and debates, either in reality or virtual. The results also suggest more channels should be used for student to participate; for example, online media. Therefore, the university can create online or virtual forums or groups for students to discuss a wide range of issues and communicate with peers or staff, which should be easy for students to access and participate. These opportunities can help students gain communication and citizenship skills. Some participants also expressed their

concern that the short-term positions in the students' union may not allow real change. This supports the finding of Brooks et al. [20], that elected officers in students' unions have less power than permanent staff members because short-term positions make it hard to ensure strategic continuity.

The study contributes to the field of student experience of democracy learning in higher education from a constructive learning perspective. It explores how students experience and learn democracy through participation in organisations and activities. Additionally, it describes the process of constructing identity and its influences on democratic participation.

The major limitation of this study is the small sample size of students with different backgrounds in the current stage. Thus, the perceptions of few individuals may not represent a whole group of students in higher education. Although small sample sizes are common in qualitative research, caution should be exercised when generalising these findings. Future research is aiming to conduct more interviews, including both student leaders and students without any positions from multiple universities.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has drawn upon interview data from a small group of student leaders and students without positions from a case university in the UK to explore students' perspectives of the university as a site to learn representative democracy. Specifically, this article has outlined four aspects with regard to representative democracy. The first is how students perceive democratic representation on campus. Second, students, particularly leaders, see themselves as change agents who seek to influence university life. Importantly, the results suggest that participation in voting and elections can enhance student learning of representative democracy and that these individuals claim they are more likely to vote in local or national elections in the future. According to the students, their university performs well in encouraging their participation, though they believe more work needs to be done to promote representative democracy in the first year. Interestingly, although belongingness is not explicitly described in relation to voting and elections, students view it as a result of participation in organisations. The different degrees of belongingness can be attributed to their individual perceptions of the extent of their participation. Caution needs to be exercised as the interview sample size was small, although it included student leaders and students who did not hold positions at the university. The findings are only applicable to students and universities in a similar context. A further qualitative study with a more representative sample will be conducted to explore the differences of student experience between different subjects and universities.

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