

Klemenčič, Manja , ed. The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. Bloomsbury Handbooks. Bloomsbury Handbooks. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 15 Feb. 2024. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350376007>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Thu Feb 15 2024 12:02:54 Ora standard dell'Europa centrale

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The Emergence of the Global Student Forum and Prospects for Increased Student Participation within the International Education Polity

Sebastian Berger, Giuseppe Lipari, Georgia Potton, and Carmen Romero

Introduction

With the collapse of the two competing international student organizations, the International Union of Students (IUS) and the International Student Conference (ISC), in the second half of the twentieth century, students were left without a representative voice on the global stage for decades (Grønne, 2017). This vacuum in global student representation coincided with a period of increased globalization in higher education, defined by Altbach as a “broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education” and the effects of which are “beyond the control of any one actor or set of actors” (Altbach et al., 2009, p. 23). Today, the system of global higher education policy-making is increasingly non-hierarchical, involving negotiation and mediation from a range of stakeholders, as opposed to unilateral decisions by single authority (Klemenčič, 2012). Key players in global higher education polity include intergovernmental organizations that hold regular education policy-making fora and processes between Member States, such as the United Nations and its subsidiary agencies, international financing institutions and multilateral funds focused on education, and a diverse, vibrant global education civil society sector composed of non-governmental organizations and trade unions who are often formally recognized and represented in the former two entities.

The Global Student Forum entered the global higher education polity in 2020. This chapter analyzes the emergence of the GSF and how, and to what extent, a democratic, representative, global student entity can influence the decentralized higher education policy-making framework and processes at the global level. To do so, the existing systems of representation and the nature of student intermediation in key global education stakeholders are assessed. This analysis utilizes the framework proposed by Klemenčič and Palomares (Klemenčič and Palomares, 2018) and the understanding that formalized routes of engagement strengthen the “legitimate power” of student organizing and enables a “higher propensity for students to influence policy processes” (Klemenčič, 2014, p. 402). Drawing on a wider range of documents issued by relevant student unions and international education sector organizations and harnessing the findings of a series of expert interviews conducted throughout 2021 and 2022, this chapter starts with the description

of the process that led to the foundation of the Global Student Forum. The following section offers an analysis of GSF internal structures, classified in line to the already existing literature on student unions. The global decision-making environment on educational policy and students' role in it are then introduced, leading to a threefold analysis of intergovernmental organizations, education financing institutions, and international organized civil society.

Historic Overview

The formation of international student politics in the post-Second World War era was organized around two major organizations, the International Union of Students—IUS (est. 1946) and the International Student Conference—ISC (est. 1950). The IUS rapidly developed a pro-communist/pro-soviet ideology which led to multiple noncommunist national unions of students terminating their membership in the organization (Altbach, 1970). In direct response to these developments and with the support of United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) covert operations funding, the ISC was founded to “deny the pro-Soviet International Union of Students its claim to represent the world student population” (Paget, 2003). In 1967 the ISC came under major financial and political pressure due to the revelation of the CIA’s financial ties and existing CIA assets in the ranks of the deeply subverted international office of the United States National Student Association—USNSA (Altbach, 1970). “The Kiddies” as these CIA student operatives were referred to in the US foreign intelligence circle, provided detailed reports on young emerging politicians, political movements, and the overall developments in international student politics from their observations made in the scope of international student events all over the globe (McDonald, 1967). After the dissolution of the ISC in 1969, that ended two decades of competition, the IUS was once again the only existing global student governance structure for roughly another twenty years. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emerging post-1989 world order, the IUS lost its funding and what was left of its relevance in student politics in the years after. It became “entirely dormant” (Shore and Grønne, 2020, p. 341) after a 2003 conference held in Ghana (Deca, 2012 in Shore and Grønne, 2020). What followed was a period of time in the nineties and early twenty-first century in which student unions, both at the regional and national level, had little to no formalized global cooperation. A minimum of existing cooperation between student platforms was linked heavily to UNESCO and its World Conference on Higher Education in 1998, 2003, and 2009 (ESU, 2012).

Recent Developments Concerning Global Cooperation between Student Federations and the Emergence of the Global Student Forum

The European Students' Union and the National Unions of Students in Norway hosted a “Global Student Voice” conference in 2016 that produced the “Bergen Declaration” (Bergen Declaration, 2016). The document expressed the “desire for universal cooperation in the defense of students’

rights, public tertiary education and access to education for all” (Bergen Declaration, 2016, p. 2) and the interest of involved student organizations “to host further meetings with students, exchange information in support of our common struggles, and expressions of support to national and regional actions” (Bergen Declaration, 2016, p. 4). This reignited a possible convergence of the international student movement and considerations for intensified future cooperation enjoyed a renaissance (Grønne, 2017). Concrete discussions concerning the creation of a formal governance structure on the global level between regional student leaders emerged in 2018, when elected representatives from the All-Africa Students Union (AASU), Commonwealth Students’ Association (CSA), European Students’ Union (ESU), and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) followed the invitation of Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi to convene in Accra, Ghana for a meeting hosted by the 100 Million Campaign (OBESSU, 2019a). This event presented the initiation of a two-year-long process that would lead to the establishment of the Global Student Forum in 2020.

Elected student leaders from regional student federations subsequently met multiple times in different parts of the world. This included gatherings on the sidelines of United Nation meetings such as the UNGA 2019 in New York (OBESSU, 2019b) and the Global Refugee Forum 2019 in Geneva, where ESU and OBESSU hosted the “Global Student Voices: Education and Migration” conference that convened student representatives from all parts of the world for a side event to the UNHCR summit (OBESSU, 2019c). These regular meetings, which served as spaces for student leaders from regional platforms to negotiate the nature and politics of the emerging global student governance structure on behalf of their organizations’ membership, were continued virtually throughout 2020 due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This continuous dialogue led to the development of the Global Student Forum proposal. The proposal, which presents the ambition for a new global umbrella of student unions from secondary and third-level education, is opened by a statement of intent from regional federations that represents the political common ground of student unions and confederations at the global level. Considering that “corporate and individualistic interests govern most decision-making processes, [...] authoritarianism has consolidated, [...] democracies have weakened as elites seize on social and economic insecurities to consolidate power” (GSF, 2020a, p. 1), the founding organizations decided to create a stable global umbrella “to urgently develop solidarity and collaboration, in order to achieve educational justice and as allies in a wider struggle for democracy, social justice and human rights” (GSF, 2020a, p. 2).

After fundraising trips in Europe and the United States in 2019 and 2020 in which connections with potential donors, allies, and critical friends were established, the project consortium consisting of the regional federations was equipped with a seed grant by the Open Society Foundations given to the European Students Union (ESU) to establish an interim-Secretariat for the GSF in 2020.

Organizational Characteristics and Membership Structure of the Global Student Forum

Building the organizational structures of the newly established GSF was the task of the interim-secretariat, comprised of staff members from ESU, OBESSU, and AASU and a Steering

Committee formed by the elected political leadership of the regional federations as well as other national student organizations which had supported the process. The Steering Committee began their two-year mandate in June 2020 and in January 2021 appointed former ESU Vice-President and founding Steering Committee member Sebastian Berger as first full time staff member and Executive Director of the GSF. Since 2021 the Secretariat has been hosted by Education International, the global umbrella of the unions of workers of education, in Brussels (Belgium).

The GSF membership is divided into three categories; 1. full membership (regional student federations and their national unions), 2. consociate membership (national unions of students outside of regional federation membership) and 3. associate membership (student organizations that do not qualify as national student unions) (GSF, 2021c). Each of the five regional federations elects one representative into the Steering Committee while the consociate and associate membership hold caucuses in which one representative for the consociate and one for the associate membership are elected by the member organizations in the respective category to represent their interests throughout the course of the Steering Committee mandate.

The internal democracy and working procedures of the GSF are governed by the Rules of Procedure adopted by the Steering Committee at the beginning of 2021 (d). The Steering Committee serves as the political executive of the organization, in continuous consultation with the represented constituencies and it is composed of volunteers. The mandate of the Steering Committee members is individual (a person is elected to the position by his/her/their constituency) and from 2022 the duration of the mandate is one year. The employees of the organization work in the Secretariat, which is headquartered in Brussels, hosted by Education International, with a regional office in Accra, Ghana, hosted by the All Africa Student Union.

Even though there are no membership fees, the main “barrier” to becoming a member of the GSF are the political and organizational criteria that student organizations need to meet to become members. These are the most important ones: a) the organization is controlled and run by students; b) it holds democratic (s)elections and runs on a democratic basis; c) it is representative and built on a solid ground with legitimacy coming from students; d) it represents a large number of students and at the same time has at least an ambition to influence national education policies; e) it is autonomous and independent in decision-making; f) it must be financially and politically independent in decision-making from any political parties, governments, and financial donors; g) the organization’s set of values and objectives are in accordance with the GSF’s values and objectives, stated in the founding documents (GSF, 2021c).

According to Klemenčič and Palomares’s classification, the GSF can be defined as a transnational “meta-association” (Klemenčič and Palomares, 2018, p. 367, 369), composed by continental and national representative platforms of students of higher education, second-level education, and post-graduate students. The GSF therefore claims to be representative of the entire body of secondary and third-level students, and in particular counts on the membership of representative tertiary student platforms and organizations from the Americas, Africa, Europe, Oceania, and parts of Asia and the Pacific (as in the classification from Klemenčič and Palomares, 2018, p. 383). The vast membership includes organizations with different structures, both social movement organizations and interest groups, depending on national and regional contexts (Klemenčič, 2012).

Political Activities and Priorities of the GSF

The Steering Committee of the GSF decided that networking, solidarity, capacity building, cooperation, research, and advocacy were to be the main political activities for its first year of operation. These were guided by eight political priorities (Democracy, Human Rights, and Solidarity, Covid-19, Racial Justice, Environmental Justice, Gender Justice, Quality Education for All and Equality) agreed upon in the GSF work plan for 2021–23, a document heavily consulted and adopted by national and regional member organizations throughout the first quarter of 2021 (GSF, 2021b).

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the GSF focused on developing a network of partners within the international education sector, forging ties with the United Nations framework, multilateral funders, and a broad spectrum of civil society organizations. This advocacy and external representation were facilitated by a series of online conferences, student caucuses, and consultations supporting the political priorities of the GSF. Some examples include a student and youth summit in parallel to the Y20 in cooperation with 100 Million (Tripathi, 2021) and a global student congress for International Students' Day in 2020 (GSF, 2021e). The Worldwide Student Summit on Climate Action and Biodiversity of the following year represented the attitude to organize events on non-sectoral topics cooperating with NGOs and groups with specific expertise (Berger, 2021). The consultations toward the World Higher Education Conference 2022 are another example of coordinated online deliberation that included GSF constituencies region-by-region (GSF, 2021a). The Academy in Activism, Leadership, and Advocacy is another key activity of the Global Student Forum, that focuses on training student leaders. Its first edition, in 2021–22, consisted of bi-weekly seminars with experts from academia, international NGOs, the media, and experts from the private sector, covering a vast selection of topics, ranging from international relations and education policy, to social and environmental justice alongside practical skills necessary for effective leadership of student unions (GSF-ALA, 2021).

Student Participation within the Institutions and Organization of the International Education Sector

Student unions on the global level are confronted with a de-centralized institutional framework. While at the national level, and sometimes regionally such as in Europe through the EHEA/Bologna Process and the European Union or in Africa through the African Union, there is a clear division of tasks and competences among executive structures, at the global level various inter-governmental organizations produce educational policy without a stable hierarchy. This chapter explores the main existing decision-making entities, looking at the effective spaces and mechanisms for participation of student representatives, and the impact that their engagement can have on the international education policy-making within these institutions. Classifying the global system as pluralist or corporatist/neo-corporatist (as in Klemenčič, 2012, p. 11) is not suitable due to a de-centralized institutional framework composed of multiple structures and organizations

with overlapping competences. Relevant institutions contributing to the formulation of educational policy on the global level have their own decision-making processes involving students and civil society actors in diverse ways. Despite the GSF currently embodying the only representative structure for students on the transcontinental level, the global system of student representation is far from a neo-corporatist one. A relevant element that introduces some characteristics of pluralism is the frequent merging of student and youth representatives in stakeholder engagement. The youth category generally encompasses a higher number of associations and organizations, active on different topics, producing a considerable degree of plurality.

To structure our research and lay the foundation for this analysis, we have identified three types of global entities influencing and making decisions regarding higher education.

1. Policy-making fora in international and intergovernmental organizations which produce standards, analyses, and policies concerning education. Within the United Nations framework, the key actor on education issues is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Further subject of inquiry will be the status and activities of student organizations within the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group operating in the UN Economic and Social Council structures. Another international organization making relevant contributions to the education field and therefore falling into this first category of interest is the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
2. Global education financing institutions, composed of governments and often other public and private stakeholders, represent a second category to analyze. These institutions wield a significant influence over education policy as their funding is often dependent on adherence to specific terms and conditions which therefore “define directly or indirectly the educational policy lines to be followed” (Moutsios, 2009, p. 468). Within this category, we have included the World Bank Group (WBG) as it is the largest financier of education in the developing world and operates in over eighty countries. We have also selected the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW) as they are not only large external funders of education worldwide, but as multi-stakeholder partnerships, provide a “space of assembly” for diverse actors to participate in decision-making where the representation of students can be assessed (Stone, 2008). The Open Society Foundations (OSF) have also been analyzed, considering its role as donor of educational projects and partner of student organizations.
3. The civil society sector focused on higher education policy sees strong representation of teachers and education workers through their global trade union Education International (EI), higher education institutions through the International Association of Universities (IAU), and a broad coalition of education Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) coming together under the umbrella of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE). All of whom wield considerable influence through their representation via elected representatives in numerous relevant spaces and mechanisms of category one and two institutions.

Spaces and mechanisms for the consultation of students exist in many of these entities, ranging from the episodic participation in events to formalized and stable presence in consultative or advisory bodies and governance boards. The participation of students in these spaces however

is often not representative, frequently featuring individual students selected by the inter-governmental organization instead of representatives elected or appointed by democratic student-led governance structures.

To assess the quality of student participation in global educational policy decision-making, we were guided by the following three sets of questions: (1) Does a stable mechanism for student participation and engagement exist or are students only sporadically involved? (2) Are student spokespeople coming from representative student organizations? (3) Are student and youth constituencies merged or separated?

Beyond assessing the mere representativeness of participation spaces and mechanisms, it is also necessary to look at the concrete outcomes of these to understand how policy-making processes are influenced by student voices. A useful reference ladder can be found in the levels of political responsiveness (Shumaker, 1975; Burstein et al., 1995, in Almeida, 2019, 126, table 6 adapted).

1. Access responsiveness—concerns of the group get access to the policy-making institutions and social movements are consulted by policymakers;
2. Agenda responsiveness—the demand is transformed into an issue to be solved, so agenda setting gets concerned and influenced by that;
3. Policy responsiveness—policy is produced, formally giving an answer to the concern;
4. Output responsiveness—legislation is enforced and measures are concretely taken;
5. Impact responsiveness—claims are satisfied and grievances alleviated in society.
6. Structure responsiveness—there are radical changes and impact is structural.

The classification according to levels of political responsiveness can be useful for our analysis since reference to and comparison with previous academic literature proved to be difficult, due to the absence of studies on student participation within global institutions, and taking into account the recent emergence of the GSF. Owing to this lack of existing scholarly work relating to student participation within relevant international institutions and organizations on the global level, our analysis draws mainly on the study of official documents, calls for participation as well as statutes and standing orders concerning spaces and mechanisms for student participation within the three categories of organizations and institutions established above. The examination of documents is substantiated by expert interviews conducted with relevant officials representing OECD, UN EASG, the World Bank, GPE, EI, GCE, IAU, and OSF, held between December 2021 and March 2022.

Category 1—Student Representation in Intergovernmental Organizations

UNESCO

As the UN agency devoted to the fields of culture and education, UNESCO is a key policymaker at the global level for higher education. Sustainable Development Goal 4 “Quality Education,” which UNESCO is responsible for delivering, doesn’t include student representation as a key objective or tool (UNESCO, 2016, 2017). Within the membership of the Collective Consultation

of NGOs on Education 2030, one can only find “discipline-specific” (Klemenčič and Palomares, 2018, 384) student-related organizations such as the International Pharmaceutical Students Federation and International Association for Political Science Students (CCNGO, 2019, 2020). Throughout 2021 and in the scope of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism revision, the Global Student Forum and other civil society organizations were lobbying for the establishment of a student seat in the new UNESCO SDG4 High Level Steering Committee (SDG4HLSC) which eventually resulted in the creation of the SDG4Youth Network as a mechanism for students and youth organizations to nominate candidates to be selected by UNESCO for the position in the SDG4HLSC and Sherpa group. While initial terms of reference of the SDG4Youth Network set out membership eligibility for individuals, lobby efforts from student organizations resulted in membership criteria being changed and opened to organizations. The SDG4Youth Secretariat then chose a cohort of around 100 representatives via top-down selection, ensuring a strong majority of youth organizations to be accepted in the network (ESU, 2022; OBESSU, 2022).

Some of the regional student federations in the membership of the GSF are also involved in the general UNESCO structure holding consultative status while other stakeholders hold associate status (UNESCO, 2021b). An example of learners’ representation with formalized characteristics and a structured role for the Global Student Forum can be found within the framework of the General Education Monitoring (GEM) Report of UNESCO. Together with the GSF, the GEM team co-hosted a dialogue for learners in 2021, and signed a co-publishing agreement with the GSF for the “GEM Youth Report 2022—Non state actors in education: who chooses who loses” (2021). The GSF and its representative regional platforms are also part of an ongoing consultation process with the UNESCO GEM personnel through a working group consulting the report recommendations and a GSF representative holding a position in the formal UNESCO GEM advisory board.

The UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022 (WHEC) marked another opportunity for student participation in the new global framework represented by the Global Student Forum. The GSF organized a series of consultations, in partnership with its regional and national members unions, to provide input to the event and inform a worldwide student declaration addressing the conference (GSF, 2021a; GSF, 2022a). The youth engagement strategy for WHEC outlines specific spaces for youth engagement, but does not attribute or acknowledge a different role to students and their movement (UNESCO, 2021c).

UN—Education and Academia Stakeholder Group

The Education and Academia Stakeholder Group is part of the UN system responsible for monitoring and reviewing the Sustainable Development Goals. The EASG “brings together human rights-based education civil society organizations as well as academia organizations and networks that work on the right to education” (EASG, 2017), including the European Students’ Union (ESU) as one of the co-founders and organizing Partner since the establishment of EASG in 2016. Dr. Katarina Popović, Co-chair of the EASG on behalf of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), explained in an interview that the EASG is a “young group [that] does not have a strong tradition of organizing” (interview, Prof. Dr. Popovic, 28/12/2021). Despite that, the group has an advanced perspective on student participation, with strong formal inclusion of student platforms: ESU was an organizing partner from the inception of EASG in 2016 till

September 2021, when ESU resigned from this role and the GSF was elected to serve as an organizing partner of the stakeholder group. Prof. Dr. Popovic underlined how the participation of organized students is relevant for the issue-based nature of the reactions and inputs required to the group and referenced the EASG side event at the 2021 High Level Political Forum moderated by the GSF Executive Director who also gave the concluding remarks as an example (EASG, 2021).

The OECD

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development provided episodic spaces of individual participation (not representative) in their Global Forum on the Future of Education and Skills, on secondary education, involving learners selected by member countries and other civil society structures in a focus group. Panelists at this conference were selected without consulting independent student and representative student organizing structures (OECD, 2020). Open consultations conducted by the OECD allow people to participate as individuals, answering questionnaires on different topics, but do not seek input from representative student structures. A more stable youth structure can be found in the “Youthwise” Youth Advisory Board, whose mandate is year-long. Membership in the first 2021 edition of this advisory body was based on a top-down selection of individual profiles made by OECD personnel, mixing youth and student constituencies (OECD, 2021). The fact that student organizations do not select their own representatives within OECD processes has been confirmed also by Dr. Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director for Education and Skills, when interviewed by the authors in January 2022. Although part of the work of the OECD is based on samples (e.g., PISA), there is space for organized representation of students to assume a stronger role, as practiced within the education worker constituency, which is represented in OECD processes through spokespeople appointed by Education International. The Global Student Forum as a stable body of representation could contribute to the idea of education as a “society project” with “students as active citizens” (and not customers), in line with OECD aspirations and how other aligned stakeholders do in the internal policy processes of the organization (Interview, Dr. Andreas Schleicher, 25/01/2022).

Category 2—Student Representation in Global Education Financing Institutions

Multilateral funds for education, whilst primarily financing institutions, wield significant influence over policymaking within the international education sector. Recognition of this power is evident in the governance of key players such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and the World Bank Group (WBG), all of which include representatives of governments and in the case of GPE as well as ECW, the private sector, civil society, and teachers.

The Global Partnership for Education

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is the largest global partnership fund for education in lower-income countries, and therefore despite not focusing on, or funding, higher education

it remains an important organization to include in the scope of this research. Currently, the only stable mode of engagement for learners (or young people) is as individual GPE Youth Leaders (GPE, 2021a): an informal route unconnected to governance, focused on external advocacy and communications (interview, GPE representative, 21/02/22). To date, GPE has no formal representation of students or their elected representatives in their decision-making structures. While a recent study into the role of non-state actors in the GPE found that civil society actors have been “relatively influential” (Menashy, 2016, p. 99), of the twenty constituencies represented on their global Board of Directors, learners and their representatives are not formally included (GPE, 2019). In an interview with a GPE Official conducted by the authors it was stated that as “board constituencies are self-governing, GPE doesn’t engage in who are the members or how they define their membership” (interview, GPE representative, 21/02/22). As a result, the participation of student organizations within the three existing CSO constituencies relies on the favorable discretion of the constituency’s current governing organization.

A governance review conducted by GPE in 2021 found “strongly expressed concern” that youth representation within GPE “avoids the risk of tokenism” and that the “right voices are heard” yet ultimately rejected a “specific proposal to include a new board seat for a youth representative” (GPE, 2021b). The review also gave no clarification on which voices are the “right” ones neither distinguished between the demographics of “youth” and “students,” the latter being confirmed as a general practice within GPE by our official interviewee (interview, GPE representative, 21/02/22). Nevertheless, the broad support by “Board members across constituencies ... for stronger youth representation” (GPE, 2021b) presents an opportunity for the GSF to build upon. The level of political responsiveness by the GPE to this potential route of student participation remains to be seen.

The World Bank

With over US\$9 billion in investments in the sector since 2015, The World Bank Group (WBG) is the largest financier of education in the developing world (World Bank Group, 2018a), with higher education as one of their focus areas (World Bank Group, 2018b), yet their bilateral operating structure means assessing the level of responsiveness to, and routes of participation for, students at the global level is difficult. Dr. Roberta Bassett, the Global Lead for Tertiary Education at the World Bank, explained in an interview with the authors, as each project is “independently structured between the client country and the Bank,” there is “not a uniform project preparation framework that would indicate which groups to engage,” but insisted that for tertiary education projects, students and student organizations are always invited to stakeholder consultations (interview, Dr. Bassett 17/12/2022). Where opportunities for global stakeholder engagement exist, Dr. Bassett indicated that the WBG would welcome the participation of a global student organization, for example in their peer review process for global documents, reports, and briefings (interview, Dr. Bassett 17/12/2022). Therefore, access responsiveness by the WBG is still lacking, but opportunities of improvement could emerge in the near future.

Education Cannot Wait

In 2020 Education Cannot Wait became the first multilateral global education fund to constitute a self-organized Youth—and Student-led subgroup within the Civil-Society Constituency, which

elects a representative organization to sit on its Executive Committee and High-Level Steering Group (ECW, 2020, 2021). Not only is the distinction between youth and students recognized as two separate demographics in the title of the sub-group, according to the terms of reference individuals are ineligible to join and organizations must be able to demonstrate they are youth—or student-led (100 Million webpage 1). The Global Student Forum has been an active member of this subgroup from the outset, alongside all the regional student platforms in its membership and a large number of national student unions. At present this sub-group has over seventy member organizations and is regularly consulted in all ECW decision-making and deliberation processes as equal stakeholders alongside governments, wider civil society, and the private sector (100 Million webpage 2). Existing for less than two years at the time of writing, this is a relatively new formal route of representation for students within ECW and it is too early to accurately assess the impact of this participation. However, structurally at least, ECW goes beyond access responsiveness and demonstrates both agenda and policy responsiveness: with the concerns of the democratic constituency of student and youth-led organizations mandated to be responded to and requiring an answer at the highest level of ECW organizational governance.

Open Society Foundation

The Open Society Foundations (OSF) is a “network of private philanthropic foundations” (Calligaro, 2018, p. 157) created in 1993 by George Soros (Calligaro, 2018; Correa-Cabrera et al., 2021). OSF follows the ideological framework of Karl Popper’s “The Open Society and Its Enemies” (1945), aiming to advocate for the defense of democracy and against authoritarianism and discrimination (1945). The open political approach of OSF, that claims to be neutral and independent from governments and powerful interest groups, makes possible a connection with a vast number of associations and NGOs with different ideological backgrounds, going from liberal to “new left” sensibilities (Calligaro, 2018, p. 167; Stubbs, 2013, p. 136). With 60 percent of its budget dedicated to grants (Calligaro, 2018, p. 158), OSF fits in the donor category in this research and is among the main funders for the organized student movement globally.

Education is one of the ten thematic objectives of the organization (Correa-Cabrera et al., 2021, p. 3), with an OSF Official confirming in an interview with the authors that a priority within this is supporting democratic student governance, ensuring that “the voice of the students and their representative organizations can be a part of the global regional and national dialogue on education policy-making” (interview, OSF Official, 28/03/2022). This belief that students “must have a central place in determining policy at all different levels” led to key partnerships with student organizations in the 2010s, including two European projects that merged the fight for migrant and refugees’ rights and the right to education: “Together Moving Forward” and “Seeds for Integration.” Due to OSF financing, the European Students Union and Organising Bureau of Secondary School Students coordinated these two respective student-led projects, including a consistent granting part, allowing national and local student unions to apply for funds for initiatives, assessed, supported, and evaluated by the two European student umbrellas (OBESSU, 2018; Together Moving Forward; Henriques and Lyamouri-Bajja, 2018, p. 30). The support of OSF has also been instrumental in facilitating the cooperation between regional student representatives in the period of time preceding the formation of the Global Student Forum, through funding explorative study visits, proposal writing workshops, and international student conferences.

Despite the dissolution of the Education Program in the scope of an internal restructuring in the foundation in 2022, as the OSF Official in our interview highlighted, students are a “force in society” beyond education issues and therefore “key actors in the broader debates of economic, social, environmental, political dimensions of our common life” (interview, OSF Official, 28/03/2022). This presents and justifies an opportunity for the inclusion and participation of the GSF, which the OSF Official noted is a “phenomenal advancement” in the coming together of student movements (Interview, OSF Official 28/03/2022), in the wider strategy and subsequent governance structures of OSF. Establishing the legitimacy for this, and other similar roles in the wider education policy—and grant-making sector, requires building trusted partnerships with allied organizations and challenging the widespread “fear and tokenism” of democratic student engagement (Interview, OSF Official 28/03/2022).

Category 3—Student Representation within the Global Civil Society Organizations

GSF, a newborn non-governmental organization, has ties with other international organizations and confederations representing other stakeholders of the educational sector. This section studies and examines three major civil society organizations which operate at the global level and represent constituencies such as teachers (Education International), Higher Education Institutions represented by its academic authorities (International Association of Universities), and finally another organization that encompasses various constituencies (Global Campaign for Education).

Education International

Education International, founded in 1992, represents teachers’ organizations and other education employees at the global level. It has a membership of 383 organizations speaking for more than 32 million teachers in 178 countries and territories (Education International, n.d.). According to Ms. Wulff, Director of Research Policy and Advocacy at Education International, many of EI’s members at the national level work with students’ unions and have structures in place to engage with students, while at the global level a historic lack of organized student governance contributed to less formalized cooperation between teachers and students until the Global Student Forum emerged (interview, 27/01/2022).

Regarding the distinction between students and youth as separate constituencies, Ms. Wulff confirmed that EI does differentiate these two constituencies and justifies this differentiation by acknowledging the privileged stakeholder status of students being directly linked to the education sector and possessing first-hand experiences of education policies and their impact (interview, Ms. Wulff, Director of Research Policy and Advocacy at Education International, 27/01/2022). According to Ms. Wulff, students are a primary partner for the teaching profession and Education International, taking into consideration their democratic and accountable self-representation structures from the institutional to the global level, to mediate students’ interests through “elected representatives as opposed to self-appointed youth representatives” (interview, Ms. Wulff, Director of Research Policy and Advocacy at Education International, 27/01/2022). EI has problematized this aspect for a long time, pointing out the way in which the focus on

youth representation has often resulted in top-down selection of token individuals, frequently from very privileged backgrounds. The creation of a global umbrella of student organizations has been supported by Education International, which currently hosts the Global Student Forum in its Brussels headquarters (interview, Antonia Wulff, 27/01/2022).

International Association of Universities

Universities at the global level are represented in the international community, and UNESCO specifically, by the International Association of Universities (IAU) founded in 1950. The aim of the IAU as stated in their constitution is “to provide a center of co-operation at the international level among the universities and similar institutions of higher education of all countries, as well as among organizations in the field of higher education generally, and to be an advocate for their concerns” (IAU Constitution). Dr. Hilligje van’t Land, Secretary General of IAU, stated that IAU deliberately focuses on inviting and including students in their events and initiatives (interview, 17/01/2022). Historically, the association found it difficult to partner with the student constituency on the global level, given the lack of a representative international student platform over the past decades. Dr. van’t Land identifies the developing partnership with the Global Student forum as an opportunity that will “allow the IAU to better liaise with student organizations around the world” (interview, Dr. Hilligje van’t Land, Secretary General of IAU, 17/01/2022). For the IAU a clear distinction in stakeholdership within the higher education sector between youth and students is rooted in their democratic beliefs, and the IAU works with students and their unions as opposed to selected youth representatives. Their track record of cooperation with student unions is substantial and includes collaborations with the European Students Union, the Erasmus Student Network, Students Organizing for Sustainability (International), and the Global Student Forum.

Global Campaign for Education (GCE)

In 1999, Education International, Oxfam International, Action Aid, and the Global March Against Child Labour founded the Global Campaign for Education (GCE). In 2022, the GCE represents over 100 national and regional education coalitions and international organizations (Oxfam, 2005). According to Oxfam, the GCE was distinctive from other organizations at the time, uniting civil society organizations from the global north and global south and including organizations such as trade unions and campaigners against child labor. In their 2015 World Assembly, the GCE membership recognized the necessity to represent and integrate youth- and student-led organizations in its governance structure. During their sixth World Assembly in 2018, European Students Union (ESU) representatives participated for the first time and the organization amended its constitution to formally establish a seat for youth-led organizations on the GCE board, the main governing body of the organization. An ESU representative was subsequently elected at this World Assembly to carry the voice of the newly created constituency (Global Campaign for Education, accessed April 28, 2022). A second seat for youth and students in the GCE board was created through a decision taken at their virtual 2021 World Assembly, with a student representative from the GSF member organization, All-Africa Students Union, later elected into this position (GCE website). Mr. Refat Sabbah, President of the GCE, defines the organization as a civil society movement with the goal to reinforce, improve, and strengthen the role of civil society in the education sector (interview, Mr. Sabbah, 27/01/2022). Mr. Sabbah recognized that

prior to the establishment of the student and youth constituency, the GCE did not have a structure to represent the student and youth voice within the governance of the organization, which Mr. Sabbah identified as a “weakness.” According to Mr. Sabbah the differentiation between student and youth constituencies is based on the conviction that students are naturally connected to the education sector and its institutions while young people as a demographic are not. Mr. Sabbah also concluded that there is a qualitative difference between the way students and youth organize themselves in democratic and representative governance structures.

Conclusions

This chapter presented the evolution of student governance structures representing higher education students on the global level and analyzed spaces and mechanisms for student participation within international institutions that shape educational policy. The formation of the Global Student Forum presents an opportunity that could impact the formal representation of students in policy-making fora, funding organizations, and civil society based platforms. As Dr. Andreas Schleicher recognized, the absence of an umbrella organization aggregating and representing students at the global level for decades affected the “stakeholder perspective” during years of increasing interaction between civil society and international institutions (interview, Dr. Schleicher, 25/01/2021). Sporadic participation, tokenism through top-down selection of unrepresentative spokespeople, and a mergence of student and youth constituencies are widespread practices that undermine democratic student representation in policy-making processes and consultations in the international education sector. This picture is summarized by Table 5.1 simplifying the findings of this chapter.

The foundation of the GSF, which unites hundreds of independent student organizations and movements all over the world and proactively engages in education advocacy and partnership building between student unions and the institutions of the international community, could be a paradigm shift in the way students are represented in the decision-making process that determines their educational and social realities. In the two years since the launch of the Global Student Forum, great strides have been made in establishing pathways for meaningful student participation throughout all categories of entities subjected to this analysis, with the United Nations Economic and Social Council—Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (Category 1), the Education Cannot Wait Fund (Category 2), and the Global Campaign for Education (Category 3) showing a high degree of political responsiveness and co-decision making powers granted to student unions and their elected representatives. Considerable support, allyship, and systematic, meaningful involvement of students can also be attributed to the other category 3 organizations, Education International and the International Association of Universities. UNESCO and the OECD do have formalized pathways (top-down selection) for student participation in place, but do not distinguish between student unions and individuals from the youth sector, harming the quality of democratic representation and undermining the students as key stakeholders in the education sector. Finally, while the GPE, the World Bank, and the OSF do not currently have any formal structures for representative student participation in decision-making processes, the interviews with representatives conducted for this chapter suggested opportunities for future developments.

Table 5.1 Student participation within international organizations and levels of political responsiveness

Organization	Process	A stable mechanism for student participation and engagement exists	Student spokespeople come from representative student orgs.	Student constituency is autonomous from youth	Level of political responsiveness
UNESCO	SDG4YOUTH	Yes	No	No	0
UNESCO	GEM Report	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
UNESCO	World Higher Education Conference	No	No	No	0
UN DESA	EASG	Yes	Yes	Yes	2-3
OECD	Youthwise	Yes	No	No	0
GPE	Board	No	No	No	0
World Bank Group	None	No	No	No	0
Education Cannot Wait	High Level Steering Group and Executive Committee	Yes	Yes	Yes	2-3
Global Campaign for Education	Board	Yes	Yes	Partly	3

Source: Compiled by the Authors.

The state of student representation and the impact of student organizations on decision-making processes at the global level will need to be closely monitored in the upcoming years. The developments of the years 2020–22, and the prior unification of regional student platforms at the global level, demonstrate the capacity of an organized student representative body to achieve access to policy-making institutions, international funds, and NGOs working on education. However, at the same time there is institutional resistance to this formal student self-government and not all of the entities subject to this analysis are ready and willing to work with the organized international student movement, embodied by the Global Student Forum and its membership. It remains to be seen in future research efforts whether the active inclusion of legitimate student representatives and organizations becomes a standard in the global education sector as teachers have achieved through Education International. Will the impact of student agency be distinguishable in the policies produced by international fora after the inclusion of the student constituency? These and many more questions stay open, laying the foundation for new studies and analyzes to be conducted in the years to come.

Acknowledgments

Sebastian Berger has been the main author of the Introduction, Historic Overview, Recent developments concerning global cooperation between student federations and the emergence of the Global Student Forum, Organizational characteristics, and membership structure of the Global Student Forum, Political activities and priorities of the GSF. He led and supported a series of interviews and conducted multiple overall revisions of all chapter sections at different stages of the writing process.

Giuseppe Lipari has been the main author of the section “Student participation within the institutions and organization of the international education sector” and co-author of the sections “Recent developments concerning global cooperation between student federations and the emergence of the Global Student Forum,” “Internal structures and functioning of the Global Student Forum,” and “Organizational characteristics and membership structure of the Global Student Forum.” He has written the part “Category 1—Student representation in intergovernmental organizations” and led the interviews, with the support of Carmen Romero and Sebastian Berger, and he has developed the final table. He has supported the interview with Refat Sabbah, led by Carmen Romero, and the review process at different stages.

Carmen Romero has been the author of the part “Category 3—Student representation within the global civil society organizations” and she has conducted several interviews with representatives of Education International, the Global Campaign of Education, and the International Association of Universities, supported by Sebastian Berger and Giuseppe Lipari. She supported Sebastian Berger when conducting interviews for other sections of the chapter. She has been co-author of the section “Internal structures and functioning of the Global Student Forum” and “Organizational characteristics and membership structure of the Global Student Forum.”

Georgia Potton has been the main author of the section “Category 2—Student representation in global education financing institutions,” leading the interviews with the support of Sebastian Berger, and the co-author of the Abstract, Introduction, and Conclusion. She has also contributed

to the analysis and research in the section “Student participation within the institutions and organization of the international education sector” alongside supporting the review and revision process at different stages.

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