Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: How organizations foster learner participation
Recorded by: SOLIDAR +

Isabelle Palanchon: First, the philosophical approach, which means that we trust that people are able to participate. Secondly, a political approach, to propose democratic, or as we like to say, sociocratic methods, through which you learn to participate in a democratic way while trying to break down power relations. Third, it is the pedagogical level, where in our method we build knowledge together - I would call this the social construction of knowledge.

Aoife Coyne: Participation in adult learning is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by the structures and practices that organizations put in place. Many providers use tools such as councils, feedback processes or co-creation methods. Yet the way these work in practice can vary widely. Looking at these structures across different learning environments can help us to understand what supports participation and where barriers can often appear. In this episode, I speak with Christina Paulus from EUCEN, Arnaud Schrooyen from European Students' Union, and Isabelle Palanchon from CEMEA France. They share perspectives from university, lifelong learning, student representation, and non-formal education, offering a broad view of how participation is organized, how learners are invited to contribute, and how these contributions shape decisions within their contexts. This is the ENHNACE Podcast, a series focused on learner voice, participation and inclusion in adult education. I'm Aoife, Communications Officer at SOLIDAR. The series is part of the Enhanced Project, a project co-funded by the European Union, which works to support democratic practices in education and to strengthen the role of learners in shaping their learning environments. Here's my conversation with Christina, Arnaud and Isabelle.

Christina Paulus: My name is Christina Paulus. I am part of the steering committee of UCEN. UCEN is the largest multidisciplinary European association of university lifelong learning and university continuing education. Our core objectives at UCEN are several. First, building a member-centered community that enables the exchange of ideas, experiences, knowledge, and best practices in university lifelong learning. Our next objective is expanding the provision of high-quality, flexible, inclusive learning opportunities, which is very important for us and also for the benefit of adult learners from all backgrounds. A third objective is contributing to the field of university lifelong learning through the development and dissemination of cutting-edge research and practice. The fourth is influencing the development of university-level learning, at the policy level as well as at national and European levels, and advocating for and promoting a European model of lifelong learning based on democracy, equal rights, and social justice.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Christina, and then I'll hand over to you, Isabelle.

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Isabelle Palanchon: Hello, I am Isabelle from the French organization CEMEA France and CEMEA is a movement of popular education and also pedagogical movement of active education or new education. And the main activity is training. And here we will exchange about vocational training in adult education. CEMEA is a national network, but also international with 43 members. And we are part of the network of SOLIDAR.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Isabel. And then finally, I'll go to you, Arnaud.

Arnaud Schrooyen: Hi, I'm Arnaud. I'm the vice president of the European Students' Union. So we are a Brussels-based NGO who represent higher education student towards the European authorities. We have been existing for more than 40 years now, and we have 43 members across 40 different European countries, so going from Iceland to Armenia. And as I said, we mostly do advocacy towards the EU, but also towards the European Higher Education Area and the Council of Europe.

Aoife Coyne: So the ENHANCE project focuses on how to involve the learner voice in policy making and decision making processes. And a challenge in this regard is that while structures for participation may exist in theory, in practice they may be very limited or may only be symbolic in nature. And we know from a consultation with learners undertaken as part of the ENHANCE project that many respondents rated opportunities for learner voice to be heard at only three out of five. And they cited things like lack of clarity, uneven implementation or the perception that these processes were only tokenistic. To begin in your own context, can you share a little bit about what kind of structures exist for learner participation and who actually has access to them? And I'll come to you first, Isabelle, if you'd like to begin.

Isabelle Palanchon: I will speak about the context of training because we are an association, and the participation of members is something else. I will concentrate on training: training for volunteers, but also vocational training. In this context, each trainee has the opportunity to participate, and participation is at two levels: the organization of the training, but also the contents. And this is possible because it is a question of conception of education. For us, education is a political question, and we therefore have to work on citizenship education and on democracy. That is why it is important to give the floor and to allow trainees to participate. For that, in all the trainings, you have different councils. This comes from institutional pedagogy, a method where, in a formal space - most of the time a meeting with a specific process - trainees are able to give their point of view, but also to participate in and decide on the organization of the training and its contents.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you for sharing your perspectives there, Isabelle. And perhaps, Christina, if I could turn to you now, and if you could share your perspectives on this issue, specifically from the perspective of higher education.

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Christina Paulus: Coming from higher education institutions, we really talk about the inclusion of learners within higher education. At the heart of any university-level learning initiatives are the principles of inclusion, accessibility, and equity. Historically, universities have been the preserve of elites, and even if this has changed significantly over the past decades, with a record number of students enrolling in higher education, certain learners, including those with low qualifications, from minority groups, with disabilities, or caring responsibilities, remain underrepresented in higher education institutions. Universities need to be proactive, not only in recruiting learners from these populations, but also in ensuring that they are provided with opportunities. This is an important role, because we strongly believe that equal opportunities and access are very important. Creating equal learning opportunities does not only mean providing one-size-fits-all learning or simply moving entry requirements, but rather involves constantly evaluating the needs of learners and offering learning solutions that are relevant, appealing, and accessible to them. It also means removing barriers to learning. The factors preventing learners from participating in higher education are varied and often invisible, and identifying and removing them requires a strong understanding of learners and a constant re-evaluation of the challenges they face. The aim is to provide real empowerment. University lifelong learning can empower learners to become active agents not only in their professional life, but also in their civic and personal life. This brings us back to informal learning and learner-centered provision, which allows individuals to take an active role in their learning and is the first step in this journey of empowerment.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Christina. And finally, then I'll come to you, Arnaud, and perhaps if you could share the perspective from students and learners. What has been your experience of this from ESU?

Arnaud Schrooyen: Yes. So in our case, it has been a long-standing commitment of the Bologna Process to ensure student participation at the different layers of education, from faculty level to university level, to national level, and also at European level, something that ESU has been advocating for a long time. Generally, we can also see that it varies from country to country. Not all countries are at the same level in terms of student participation in decision-making processes. In some cases, it is really only at faculty level, in others it is more at overall university level. It really depends. But we are strongly advocating for students to be involved at every step, not only on the boards of universities or faculties, but also in designing programs, as well as in social affairs, quality assurance, and related areas. When it comes to accessibility, student representation should also reflect the population in higher education, which is still quite elite. There is still a long way to go before higher education becomes more inclusive. What we also see in terms of student representation is that people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are often more afraid of backlash because of their involvement,

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whether from teachers, deans, or university leadership. So it is also about finding a balance in how we can ensure that when students are asked for their opinion or asked to take on representation roles, their input is genuinely taken into account and not used in a tokenistic way, where their opinion is collected but ultimately not reflected in decisions.

Aoife Coyne: Isabelle, would you like to react to this?

Isabelle Palanchon: From my part, I think participation is not a question of level of education. In our center, we have trainees from level 1 to level 7, and we use the same methods and the same pedagogy with all of them, although the process may change. In any case, I think a pedagogy that enhances participation is based on three things. First, the philosophical approach, which means that we trust that people are able to participate. Secondly, a political approach, to propose democratic, or as we like to say, sociocratic methods, through which you learn to participate in a democratic way while trying to break down power relations. Third, it is the pedagogical level, where in our method we build knowledge together - I would call this the social construction of knowledge. The last element is having formal spaces for consultation and decision-making. I would say these are the three levels, and they are important for any level of education and any qualification in our center.

Aoife Coyne: So as we've highlighted there, in many cases, structures do actually exist through which learners can have their voices heard. But there are also many challenges that learners face in accessing those structures. And one of the things that came up in the ENHANCE project is that while learners feel that maybe there is a space for them to give input and to be consulted, their input may not actually have impact or they don't really have the power to shape decisions or outcomes that affect them. So then in your experience, can you think of an instance in which learners were really able to have an impact on a decision or maybe on the other side in which the learner voice was disregarded? So Christina, I'll come to you first if you can think of an instance where this happened or if you can think of a project in which you worked on this issue.

Christina Paulus: Talking about our UCEN projects, we have several projects which really explore inclusive learning, and we ask our learners to become more active and raise their voice in terms of what they would like to do. Just to mention a few of these projects, they are called SMILE, COMMIT, and VINCE.

Especially the VINCE project was a project on refugees and their learning experiences. The VINCE project invited several institutions to take part, focusing on refugees who come to different countries and try to adapt to the learning environment in their new context. WINS really provides learners with a voice, especially when it comes to people who are refugees

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coming to a new country and taking part in the learning environment. I invite you to look at our website and learn more about the VINCE project.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Christina, for sharing those insights. And then if I can come to you, Isabelle, can you think of an example from your experience in which the learner voice really had impact or in which, on the other hand, it was maybe disregarded?

Isabelle Palanchon: Okay. I would like to give the example of the training for volunteers, BAFA. It is a training for which most participants are youngsters, and it prepares them to lead holiday camps. In this training, each day trainees have an evaluation session where they can exchange views on what is positive and negative, so they are involved in their own training and their own learning. After this session, we have a council called the Bigger Council. Each group has to bring the topics they would like to discuss together, as well as the proposals they would like to make for the training and the things they want to change. We do this every day, and after this council the team of trainers has to take the decisions of the council and implement them the next day during the training. We have this process in almost every training. This is how we make trainees' decision-making happen, and it can concern both the organization and the content.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Isabel, for sharing this positive example. And then finally, I'll come to you, Arnaud, on the same issue, if you can think of an example on which learner voice really had an impact or in which, on the other hand, it didn't.

Arnaud Schrooyen: I mean, more of a success story is that we now have, at the European level, the Principles and Guidelines on the Social Dimension. These are broad principles outlining what we believe should be implemented in Bologna countries when it comes to social inclusion in higher education. It is something that actually came from ESU and that ESU advocated for, and that we then co-developed with all EHEA members. In the end, it managed to establish standards on the social dimension of education, but also a monitoring framework afterwards, allowing us to monitor and see what is happening in the countries and how they are performing within the scope of their social policies. And then you also asked about something where it did not work out so well. I do not really have something coming to mind at European level because, in the end, it is very consensus-building and co-construction. Even if it is maybe not the biggest win, we still manage to have some of our points included in the process. But I do have a good example from when I was a student representative at national level in Belgium, where, according to the law, my national student union has to be consulted every time the Minister of Higher Education proposes a new law. We could see that we were consulted because they had to be, but nothing really came out of it. Even when we strongly opposed a proposed law or came with alternative solutions, in around 80 to 90 percent of cases none of

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them were taken into account. At those moments, it felt very tokenistic: they had to consult us, so they did, but it did not have any real impact on the outcome.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Arnaud, and it's great to hear another success story. So Christina and Isabelle, I see you both want to come in here. So maybe Christina, I'll come to you first and then I can hand it over to Isabelle.

Christina Paulus: I want to react to Isabel's success story on volunteer work. I think learning really goes back to early childhood education, and to the possibility for children and families to engage in voluntary work. It is an opportunity for a child to learn from a very early stage what it means to be an active citizen. Learning to be an active citizen in any context gives learners a lot of confidence and voice, and this can then be carried forward into higher education institutions, which is brilliant. I think this is one of the key aspects when we talk about learning: we should not forget that learning is lifelong learning, from the beginning when you are a baby and a child until the end of life. Voluntary work and informal learning can have a much broader and, in some cases, more important impact on a person than formal learning. Just now in the summer, when we talk about climate change and we see all these firefighters working in the context of fires in the south of Europe, it becomes very visible how important voluntary engagement is. Strategically, we should put more effort into supporting and working with volunteers, and make clear to them: this is your voice, this is your strength. I think strength is the most important element in any story of success.

Aoife Coyne: Indeed, it's important in these conversations to consider that the learner voice and learning is something that is important throughout life and not only in the classroom, but also outside of it. And Isabelle, would you like to pick up on this?

Isabelle Palanchon: I wanted to share the example of a group of international volunteers in my organization who wanted to learn how to apply for financial support. So we proposed that they write a real application for an international project. They organized themselves to apply for this project, and we supported them in the process. In the end, they succeeded, and now they have to implement an international project. In this example, I would like to focus on the role of the educator and the learner. For me, the educator has to find the right way to make the needs and interests of the learners emerge and to create the right conditions for learning. The learners, in turn, have to work on their confidence, express themselves, and engage with the project in the short and medium term.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Isabelle. And then Arnaud, I'll come to you if you'd like to add here.

Arnaud Schrooyen: I also wanted to add that I generally think that learners know they can volunteer, and if they want to, they will find ways to volunteer. But what we are seeing a lot is

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that there are issues around having the means to be able to volunteer, especially when it comes to higher education, where in a lot of countries the cost of study is getting higher and higher and financial support that you can get is not keeping pace. If you look at students who, for example, have to work alongside their studies, or who have to retake exams at the end of the summer, or similar situations, they do not really have the time to volunteer. So I think that is also something that needs to be kept in mind: it is important to give everyone the means to be able to volunteer. Otherwise, it will again become something that is reserved for a kind of elite that has the financial means and the time to do so.

Aoife Coyne: We touched there on some success stories in terms of learner participation, as well as some barriers that learners can face. So maybe we can zoom in a bit more on the barriers. As part of the ENHANCE project, the consultation with learners highlighted several barriers that learners face in meaningfully participating in processes that affect them. These included things like time pressure or issues around confidence or a perceived lack of value in their inputs. In your view and in your experience, what factors could make it difficult for learners to participate meaningfully in different processes and to speak up and really be taken seriously in different learning settings? And maybe Arnaud, if I can come to you first and if you could share your reflections both as a learner and in your experience at ESU?

Arnaud Schrooyen: I mean, as I said earlier, what we notice is that fear of repercussions is quite present, and it explains why people are often afraid to speak up, engage, and participate. Something else we are also noticing, especially at local or national level, is that there is a difference in conditions: teachers, but also academic staff, generally have more time to prepare for meetings and consultations. Students, for example, do not always have the background knowledge needed to fully participate in discussions on specific topics. We also see that this difference in knowledge around certain topics can make things more challenging. In addition, there is sometimes a paternalistic tone coming from within the academic community towards student representatives - along the lines of "you are young, you do not know as much as we do." Contributions can also be easily dismissed because students are not using the "correct" vocabulary or because they may seem unsure, especially if it is their first or second time participating in such settings.

These are some of the main issues we observe when it comes to what enables or hinders meaningful engagement and participation.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Arnaud. Isabelle, would you be in agreement with us?

Isabelle Palanchon: Yeah, I completely agree with what Arnaud said. People have to be trained to speak with others, but also to work on critical thinking, develop their arguments, make up their mind, and form a point of view. It is something that has to be worked on with

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them beforehand, and in a collective way. Then there is the question of teachers or trainers who work with them. I agree that a paternalistic posture does not support participation. Educators have to be supportive, but they also have to trust that people are able to do it. They also need to provide a clear framework: what can be decided and what cannot, because sometimes it is not clear whether something is only consultation or an actual decision-making process. Afterwards, people become disappointed because they contribute many ideas and nothing happens. The last point is that we are seeing, especially in vocational training, more and more individual learning paths, with training becoming increasingly personalized. In some organizations, consultation is organized, but on an individual basis rather than in a collective group. As a result, the impact of learners' perspectives is weaker, because it is not the same if it is the view of one person or the view of a group. This personalization of training does not help to develop collective critical thinking or a collective dimension.

Aoife Coyne: So we focused quite a bit there on the barriers that face learners when it comes to participating meaningfully, but there are obviously also a lot of promising practices out there. And with this in mind, I was wondering if you could share approaches from your work that have made learner participation more effective and inclusive and what you think others could take from these practices. And Isabelle, I will come to you first.

Isabelle Palanchon: I would say that we try to mix methods, and participation is not only about speaking or writing things. We try to combine different approaches, especially artistic and cultural ones, and use different supports. We had some youngsters who produced a report and worked as journalists. They carried out a report with their trainer to express their point of view about their district and what could be changed. So we use different media to work on critical thinking and on the way people express themselves, rather than speaking directly in front of others, but having the time to prepare what they are going to say. For some people, this can be easier. I have another example with a group of migrants we host every day. We work with puppets - in French, marionettes - and they prepare a performance with these puppets to speak about their migration journey and what they think authorities should put in place to improve reception and make the lives of migrants better. These are two examples of participation. We work in different ways with specific audiences.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you very much for joining me today to the three of you. It was a very interesting discussion and I really appreciate you sharing your insights. What you've just heard is the ENHANCE podcast, a series focused on learner voice, participation and inclusion in adult education. The ENHANCE project is co-funded by the European Union. If you're interested in learning more about SOLIDAR's work on education and lifelong learning, you can find our social media in the episode description or visit solidar.org.

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