



Brief description

A significant proportion of the Bologna youth population is made up of students. There are formal mechanisms for election of student representatives within the University, and this example is an extension of these formal arrangements. This project is a sub-group of formal Student representation. USN is an association established by a group of students of the School of Political Sciences in 2013. The main objective of the association is promoting inclusiveness and providing a safe and secure place where there is open opportunity for discussion. They also support participation in the elections and in the University student councils; organization of meetings between students and experts on topic such as gender theory and social recognition; they hold debates or seminars on cultural themes or current events; they show films and support social and cultural actions in the urban space. They have around 50 members, age between 21 and 26. All of them are university students. The proportion of boys and girls participating is more or less equal.

What we learned about participation

Participation is a chance to impact on student life

The group takes a systematic approach to issues related to a) lessons calendar; exam sessions; compulsory attendance b) internationalization especially Erasmus programs and summer and winter schools abroad c) the right to education, which includes broadening the issues that can be studied to include all social and political issues.

Participation is a tricky matter of visibility and spreading awareness and knowledge.

During one of the public meetings, the group discussed how it is difficult to communicate with the broader student community in Bologna and make the USN association known (even if they are elected in several academic bodies). This issue emerged also because of the perception of scarce involvement of students in general in participatory activities, shown also by the low flow in the last student election.

"I believe that, in order to be inclusive, you have to show a placid image, that let the person in front of you to listen to you, because often... if a student from an union came to say the same things as I do, for instance that our didactics diagrams do not work, I would be listened, he wouldn't, because he is linked to a specific idea. I am, instead, a student among students." (USN, Bologna, GD, May 2016).

Participation may be stronger if we use smaller projects and groups to engage.

During a meeting, students mutually agreed that the best way to reach students is through smaller projects/groups - focused on specific topics - that can drive attention and interest. That is the case of the Anthropology group (created after 4 years of efforts), and of the new-born LGBT Project: these are occasions where students can find a place to meet each other and are promoted within the frame of the USN. People who participate in these groups then are automatically in touch with the wider association.

"The USN is a student union, it deals with politics, and if you say to a student or to your peer politics, student politics, he looks at you sideways. The LGBT group isn't just that. It is seen by students as a safe place, that is what we want to offer, the reason why it was born, it's more of the heart; it moves people more". (USN, Bologna, GD, May 2016)

Participation is a way of belonging.

"That's also an informal group, a group of friends, that makes a lot to people, it's like a family environment, important to feel free to express oneself" (USN, Bologna, GD, May 2016).

Key Challenges Identified

The distance and suspicion which young members of the University Student Network experience from other students, because of a suspicion of student politics, is a major and persistent challenge. The need to sustain work in the face of an inevitable turn over of activists, who are moving on in their lives, both from school to University, and from University to a wider world of engagement is a challenge.