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Students' Perceptions of Citizenship and Civic Engagement at Higher Education Institutions in Germany

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Abstract

Literature on citizenship emphasizes the role of education in providing an opportunity for young people to participate effectively in democratic life and society. However, this role and responsibility have mostly been imposed on schools, not higher education institutions. Being able to participate effectively in democracy is a complex issue that requires opportunities to gain skills, knowledge and strategies for effective engagement. So civic engagement at school level is not enough to foster civic engagement, as learning how to participate in democratic life and society as an informed and active citizen is a life-long process. This study investigates students' perceptions of citizenship and the current situations and approaches at German universities with respect to civic engagement. The findings in this research are based on qualitative data generated through individual interviews with 14 bachelor students from five different German universities. The findings provide valuable insights into how young students grasp the notion of citizenship, their roles in society and whether they are seeking for civic engagement and are satisfied with the support provided by their universities for civic engagement. The results of this study reveals the diverse and complex understanding of citizenship among young people, different assessments of their roles in society as a citizen, their participations in civic activities at university and their expectations from their universities with regard to civic engagement.

Keywords: perception of citizenship; civic engagement and higher education

Introduction

Active citizenship or active citizens are described in international literature as citizens who "critically engage with and seek to affect the course of social events" (Ross, 2012, p.7) and "shape and change society" (Onyx, Kenny and Brown, 2012, p.56). However, young people need knowledge and skills and opportunities to exercise and apply these skills in their societies as active citizen (Tawil, 2013). Soltan (1999) describes civic skills as the abilities to liaise with civil servants and politicians, affect policy and government and engage with critical thinking towards civic and political issues.

Global and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, politicians, media and educators have increased their attentions to the subject of citizenship

and emphasized the role of education to promote civic engagement and education. Interestingly, schools have been in the focus and required to foster and contribute to civic education and engagement, but not higher education institutions (Englund, 2002). Actually, civic missions of universities have either decreased or disappeared: they have concentrated on research more to foster the economies and industries than civic engagement and education, and Annette (2010) gives the universities in England as an example. Today's research universities should rethink about their disappearing civic mission (Goddard, 2009) and adopt new leadership and strategies to support students' civic engagement by providing opportunities. It has been stated that

“Opportunities which stimulate young people's curiosity, interest and engagement, and involve them in thinking and learning about issues which promote an ethic of care, compassion and commitment to diverse community concerns throughout their lives are essential for informed and active citizenship” (Henderson and Tudball, 2016, p.15).

This study explores undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of citizenship at German universities that constitute one of the best higher education systems in the world. For instance, according to the Times Higher Education, World University Rankings 2019, 47 universities in Germany are counted among the very best in the world. However, the important point here is the number of students enrolled in German universities. According to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), in 2016/17 2.8 million students were enrolled at German universities, while this number was 2.6 million in France and 2.3 million in the UK. This study provides valuable insight into what the experience of German universities is with regard to students' civic engagement. To find out existing perceptions of citizenship among young people and what the current situations with respect to civic engagement at German universities are, this study investigates undergraduate students' perceptions of citizenship and their universities' support and attitudes to civic engagement. It also explores how students evaluate their roles in society and whether they are willing or not to participate in civic activities. The findings are based on qualitative data generated through individual interviews with 14 bachelor students from five different German universities.

Conceptions of citizenship

As Lawton, Cairns and Gardner (2000) remark: “Citizenship is a recent concept as part of modern nation state, because in ancient and medieval societies (where monarchies, empires and chiefdoms existed), people were referred to as subjects or non-citizens” (p.17). Although giving a clear and precise definition to citizenship is difficult because of the complexity of the topic of citizenship (Wood, 2014), it can be understood as the relationship between individuals and state and between individuals and their society. For example, for Sinclair (2001), citizenship means ‘the particular nationality that someone has and the official status,

rights, and duties that any has because of it' (p.243). However, belonging to one nationality or state and having a passport does not really mean 'being a citizen', because being a part of society or any political community or state imposes rights and responsibilities for citizens and requires public involvement (Huddleston and Kerr, 2006). In other words, "citizenship goes beyond "doing good works;" it develops young people's ability to apply political knowledge and understanding to issues that concern them" (Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning, 2007,p.4). Recently, rather than citizenship, a new notion - 'active citizenship' is discussed in the international literature that is based on active participation in social and political life of society. Active citizenship can be considered a corner stone of democratic society where young people can share their ideas and needs, participate in civic activities, adopts critical approaches to public issues to make changes in their societies (Andrews and Mycock, 2007; Ross,2012; Onyx , Kenny and Brown, 2012).

Approaches to citizenship are various. For example, the table below indicates three different approaches to citizenship and how they overlap.

McLaughlin (1992)	Parker (1996)	Westheimer and Kahne (2004)
"Minimalist" (A citizen is described as a person with civil status and rights based on the rule of law)	"Traditional" (A citizen is described as a person who has general understanding of democratic values and government)	"Personally Responsible" (A citizen is described as a person who fulfills his/her basic responsibilities such as obeying rules)
"Maximalist" (A citizen is described as a person who has understanding of himself/herself as a member of community and is aware of his/her rights and responsibilities)	"Progressive" (A citizen is described as a person with understanding of democratic values and government who is willing and tend to participate in civic activities)	"Participatory" (A citizen is described as a person who actively participate in social and civic affairs)
	"Advanced" (A citizen is described as a person with understanding of democratic values and government who actively participates in political and social affairs)	"Justice-oriented" (A citizen is described as a person who has understanding of social, political and economic issues and ability to assess these issues)

Table 1: Approaches to citizenship and their descriptions.

The approaches to citizenship described by McLaughlin (1992) are '*minimalist*' and '*maximalist*' approaches. On '*minimalist*' views, a citizen is a person who has civil status and rights in the community based on the rule of law, on '*maximalist*' views, being a citizen means more than having a passport and right to vote. '*Maximalist*' approach requires a citizen to have understanding of him/herself as a member of community where a shared democratic culture exists and his/her rights as well as responsibilities. McLaughlin (1992) explains the main difference between these two approaches as "the degree of critical understanding and questioning on the part of students that is being aimed at and the extent to which a general liberal and political education of some substance is seen as implied" (p245).

Furthermore, three various conceptions of citizenship education for a democratic society described by Parker (1996) are "*traditional*", "*progressive*" and "*advanced*". While citizens with *traditional* approach have a general understanding of democratic values and government, citizens with *progressive* approach have the same understanding, but pay more attention to civic participation. When it comes to the *advanced* approach, it can be considered a developed and more active form of the *progressive* approach that requires active participation in political and social affairs.

Besides, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have suggested three types of citizenship: *personally responsible citizen*, *participatory citizen*, and *justice-oriented citizen*. Here with *personally responsible citizen*, they refer to a citizen who fulfills basic responsibilities such as obeying rules or keeping his/her neighborhood clean as a citizen in his/her community. Scholars such as Lickona (1993) support the idea to develop personally responsible citizens by building character and personal responsibility with fairness, honesty, hard work and self-discipline. The second type of citizenship is *participatory citizenship* which is typical for citizens who actively participate in their community including social and civic affairs. Supporters of this type of citizenship such as Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) state the importance of teaching and training students how government and community organizations work and that they can participate in activities for people in need. When it comes to *justice-oriented citizenship*, it refers to citizens who can understand and evaluate social, political and economic issues. Here the main focus is on social justice and seeking ways to make social change through critical analysis of social issues and injustice.

Although the approaches to citizenship contain some different focuses and elements, the idea of active citizenship is supported by all these approaches. For instance, while Parker's (1996) conception of *advanced citizenship* addresses the importance of active participation in social and political affairs, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe this point as a part of the conception of *participatory citizenship*. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004) participatory citizen is an

“active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts” who “organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promotes economic development, or cleans up environment, knows how government agencies work, knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks” (p.240).

According to the various approaches to citizenship discussed above, civic engagement constitutes an important aspect of the conceptions of citizenship.

Civic engagement and higher education institutions

“Democracy may actually flourish with only middling levels of political engagement if it is rich in social and moral engagement” (Berger, 2009, p.336). To build and maintain democratic society people should have an active participation in civic affairs and social and political life of community in local, state and national level which is called civic engagement (See for example, Berger,2009; Putnam, 2000). Civic engagement is “...people’s connection to the life of their community” (Putnam, 1995, p.2) and strengthens the relationship between people and their societies and can have an influence on political issues related to them and their societies (Putnam, 2000; Garcia,2003). Civic engagement is a corner stone for a democratic society as McBride, Sherraden and Pritzker, (2006) call civic engagement “a hallmark for democracy, the space of freedom where citizens exercise rights, voice, and conscience” (p.152). For Checkoway and Aldana (2013), civic engagement is a „process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern“ (p.1894). However, Berger (2009) suggests not using this term as ‘civic engagement’, but replacing it with “political engagement”, “social engagement” and “moral engagement”. He argues that this separation of categorization of civic activities will create clearer understanding and discussion of the issue.

When it comes the role of education to promote civic engagement, it has been clearly stated in the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education that one of the role of education is to provide young people with opportunities to participate actively in democracy and enable them to exercise and defend their democratic rights in society (*Council of Europe, 2010*). Literature on citizenship also addresses the role of education enabling young people to participate effectively in democratic issues (see, for example, Print, 2009; Peterson, 2011). However, citizenship is being discussed and fostered more at schools than in higher education. As Englund (2002) states, historically in Western democracies citizenship education has been considered the responsibility of the school system, not higher education. For example, a study for the European Commission in 2012, which has frequently stated its commitment to education for democratic citizenship at schools in member states, reported that ‘Citizenship education is part of national curricula in all countries’ (Eurydice, 2012, p.13). Furthermore, new or revised curricular for education for citizenship have also been developed in a number of non-European jurisdictions, including

New Zealand, Mexico, Hong Kong and Thailand (Ainley, Schulz and Friedman, 2013). The ways of teaching civic and citizenship education and approaches can differ, while they may have the same instructions, methods and approaches in different curricular areas around the world (see, for example, ICCS, 2016). The *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (ICCS, 2009, 2016) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) provides information about how civic education is taught and what the approaches are to civic education around the world.

However, being able to effectively participate in democracy is a complex issue which requires opportunities to gain skills, knowledge and strategies for effective engagement. Therefore, teaching citizenship at school level is not enough to foster civic engagement, as learning how to participate in democratic life and society as an informed and active citizen is a life-long process. Universities need to rethink about their civic role as a higher education institution. For example, how current curriculum might provide opportunities for university students to develop their civic capacities, knowledge and skills they have gained at school for active citizenship. Recently, there have been calls to universities to rethink their civic role (see, for example, Goddard, 2009; Heiland and Huber, 2014) and the number of these calls is increasing. For instance, these were the questions asked by Chris Duke:

“What needs to happen to empower the student to feel part and to be an active part of his or her society? What need you learn and must you be able to do – and feel – to contribute to societal learning? What are the skills of civic and political participation, and where do they appear in the curriculum of higher education? It will be necessary to keep asking these questions to sustain a relevant and effective lifelong learning curriculum” (Duke, 1997, p. 69).

If existing disciplines at universities are renewed, it might provide new opportunities for civic education and engagement (Boyte and Kari, 2000). Overall, opportunities provided by universities for civic engagement will be helpful to produce “civic minded graduates” who have “the capacity and desire to work with others to achieve the common good.” (Steinberg, Hatcher and Bringle, 2011, p.22). It includes “understanding the complexity of issues in modern society,” “skills in communication, diversity and consensus,” “disposition valuing community engagement, self-efficacy, and sense of responsibility to use knowledge gained in higher education to serve others” (Steinberg, Hatcher and Bringle, 2011, p.22). Even, today’s employers are searching for graduates who have awareness of changes in society, knowledge of cultural diversity, values, social responsibility and are yearning for civic engagement (Gould, 2011; Hart Research Associates, 2013, 2015).

Recently, higher education institutions have increased their attentions to civic learning and engagement promoting community based or service learning initiatives that aim “to actively

engage students in the learning process in a reflective and critical way, through interaction and engagement in the community or civic sphere” (Boland, 2014, p.181). Hou and Wilder (2015) distinguish service learning from voluntarism or philanthropy by stating that service learning makes a place in teaching and learning for relevant service. Furthermore, some universities have established special centers or departments with a focus on civic learning and engagement. One of the noticeable examples can be DukeEngage - the Duke Center for Civic Engagement which was established at the Duke University in 2007. As it is stated in the official website of the university, the mission of this center is to empower

“students to address critical human needs through immersive service, in the process transforming students, advancing the University’s educational mission, and providing meaningful assistance to communities in the U.S. and abroad”

The center provides support including funding to students who undertake civic engagement projects in the USA or abroad and all DukeEngage projects are recorded on students’ transcripts.

Research aim and questions

To identify perceptions of citizenship among young people and what the current situations with respect to civic engagement at German universities are, this study investigates undergraduate students’ perceptions of citizenship and their universities’ support and attitudes to civic engagement. It also explores how students’ evaluate their roles in society and whether they are willing or not to participate in civic activities. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. What are the students’ perceptions of citizenship?
2. How do the students assess their role in society?
3. What are the students’ approaches to civic engagement?
4. To what extent are the students satisfied with the practices of civic engagement at their universities?

The findings are based on qualitative data generated through individual interviews with 14 bachelor students from five different German universities.

Method

Qualitative research design

As the study investigates students' perceptions of citizenship and their lived experience, a qualitative approach, more precisely interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted. IPA focuses on

“personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.53).

The importance and main feature of IPA as a qualitative research design is that it explores lived experience of individuals about a phenomena as these individuals describe (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). However, IPA requires the researcher to do interpretative work to make sense of what the participant is saying and this explains the name of the method (Smith and Osborn, 2004).

Sampling

In order to be able to evaluate the students' experience at university, the main criteria for the participants was that they had to be at least in their second year of their studies. It ensured that the participants had enough time and experience at their universities and they had common experience as a student to share (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2017) was used in this study to recruit the participants: students suggested other suitable students. It should also be stated that a form of purposive sampling is recommended for IPA (Smith and Osborn, 2004). Initially, 20 bachelor students studying at five different German universities were invited to participate in the study and 14 of them accepted the invitation. This number of participants was consistent with IPA, as Smith and Osborn (2004) consider small numbers of participants (six to fifteen) appropriate to IPA studies.

The ages of participants ranged from 20 to 26 and their fields of study were Social Work, English, Geography, Economy, Gerontology, Marketing, Mechanical Engineering and Theology. The participants were from the following universities: University of Cologne; University of Jena; University of Vechta; Brandenburg University of Technology; Humbolt University of Berlin. To ensure gender balance, half of the participants were male and half were female.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. Kvale (2007) calls semi-structured interview 'life-world' interview that allows to collect the data from interviewees representing their understanding of their own experiences. In general,

“qualitative interviews provide us access to social worlds, as evidence both ‘what happens’ within them and of how individuals make sense of themselves, their experiences and their place within these social worlds” (Miller and Glassner, 2016, p.52).

Although the interviewer had the interview guide with the questions, these questions were not asked one by one that would prevent the participants telling their stories or giving more information about their experiences. On the contrary, the interviews were organized as a conversation. The position of the interviewer as a PhD student helped the participants feel empathized and share their stories. The individual interviews took from 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted outside their universities such as their flats and coffee shops. It helped them feel comfortable and share their experiences, especially with their universities (Krueger and Casey, 2015). The locations of the universities were different and there was a need to travel among these cities. Therefore, it took about three months to conduct all the interviews. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and the notes taken during or after the interviews to record emotions and other reactions expressed by the interviewees were added to the transcriptions. The data in this study generated through in-depth individual interviews was analyzed manually by employing qualitative version of content analysis (Wilkinson, 2016). The participants were labeled with identifiers (Student1, Student2 and etc.). The process of analysis began by reading the transcripts several times to get familiarity and make initial descriptions of the data. It allowed the finding out of the recurrent instances which were subsequently grouped into larger units – categories and themes. After the analysis of each transcripts, a comparative analysis was undertaken to identify overarching and superordinate themes among the transcripts. The commonalities and divergences in the young people's understanding of aspects related to the issues under the study were identified. Eventually, the final list of themes constituted the basis to write up the findings of the study.

Findings

The findings of the study collected through in-depth individual interviews provided an insight into what the students' perceptions of citizenship were, how they evaluated their roles in society, whether they were willing for civic engagement activities (Checkoway and Aldana, 2013) and to what extent, they were satisfied with the support of their universities for these kinds of activities.

Perceptions of citizenship

In order to ascertain students' views about citizenship and what being a citizen means for them, participants were asked to share their ideas on citizenship and describe what being a citizen means for them. According to the generated data, the answers were grouped into four thematic categories:

- *Citizenship as belonging*
- *Citizenship as having responsibilities*
- *Citizenship as having rights*
- *Citizenship as community involvement*

Citizenship as belonging

The majority of participants initially related citizenship to belonging to their nation-state and having a German passport, as illustrated in the following comment by a 23 year-old male student,

- “Firstly, being a citizen for me... means having a German passport.” (Student 11)

However, for some students, living in a country or belonging to a country was the only meaning and definition of citizenship. The brief comment made by a 20 year-old female student can summarise this perceptions,

- “It is just where you are living at the moment...So, if I was in America, I would be a citizen of America.” (Student 5)

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However, for the student whose parents were from Poland, but who was born and grew up in Germany, being a citizen meant a sense of belonging, not to a country, but to Europe and he considered himself as a citizen of Europe rather than Poland or Germany,

- “My parents are from Poland and I tell my friends that I am feeling like Polish...but actually, not...I don't want to belong to any country ...I don't want to feel like German or Polish...I feel like European...This is citizenship for me...” (Student 6)

Citizenship as having responsibilities

Some participants related being a citizen to having responsibilities. They stated that as they were citizens, they had responsibilities for their society and they had to fulfill these responsibilities. This is illustrated clearly in the following quotation,

- “Being citizen...means I live in this society, so I need to think about others...For example, I don’t throw rubbish outside...When I go to election, I think it is my responsibility...” (Student 4)

The other comment made by another student who stated her responsibilities for the government and society can also be an example,

- “If I have a job, I have to pay tax...because I live here...the state has right to take money from you for public things” (Student 14)

A few students stated how they felt guilty when they talked about the funding they got from the government for their studying and their responsibilities to return this amount to the government in the future. They stated that the government provided the funding for them, but they did not do anything for the government yet. This is how a participant expressed his idea about it by feeling shy and guilty,

- “I would like to give something back to society...I take much...I feel like I don’t give back enough...For example, I take money for my studying from the state and I am doing nothing for this moneyand I feel bad, because I don’t have to pay back this money....I have to return only 30% of this money...I am just taking something from the society and I am not giving back anything....” (Student 12)

Citizenship as having rights

Only a few students talked about rights when they defined citizenship. One of these students considered being a citizen as only having rights, while for others having rights was a part of their perceptions of citizenship. The stark comment below was made by the student for whom being a citizen meant firstly and only having rights,

- “To have many rights...political rights...And you can say what you want ...maybe...You are free to choose anything...” (Student 1)

Another student emphasized rights and responsibilities together when he was asked what being a citizen meant for him and made a comparison between them. The comment below shows how he perceived being a citizen by stating his responsibilities and rights together,

- “On one side, I would say that I do something for the government...for the society, for Germany...On the other side, I can take something...what they offer....Normally, studying is expensive, but I can say: “Can you educate me?”...I can say this...This is my right ...I am a citizen.” (Student 9)

Citizenship as community involvement

For only the very small minority of the participants, active community involvement was a part of the characteristics of citizenship. They stated the importance of the interaction among people living in the same society, rather than just belonging to the society. For example, the participant who made the following comment believed the importance of interaction in society and possibility to make changes in society with active involvement,

- “Being a citizen means...A person who is a part of society...and well, depending on country, you can both affect people around you and you can also be affected by people around you...Interact with your society, change the way things work in your country” (Student 7)

The comment made by another participant also starkly indicates how community involvement and interaction with society make a place in his conception of citizenship,

- “Sometimes you can share what you think...Others can share what they think...Being a citizen means for me...to find a mutual way.” (Student 13)

Students’ roles in society

When the participants were asked how they saw and evaluated their role in society, the opinions varied. For example, some participants, being a student in a society meant having a role and opportunity to make changes in society, the other participants thought that as they were students, they could not have an important and significant role in society. For example, one of the students made the following comment about his role in society as a student,

- “We do not have so important role in society...As we are students...As a student you have responsibilities...If you start working, yes...Then you will have a role in society.” (Student 9)

However, some other participants believed their roles in society were important and saw their roles in society as change makers. This is how a student explained her opinion about her role

in society by specially stating how being a student was an advantage to make some changes in society,

- “For me, being a student means you have to change something ...It is good...I think student life is a good chance...You have lots of other young people...There lots of academic people...There is knowledge.” (Student 3)

Furthermore, for some participants, their roles in society were formed by existing expectations from them and the following comment can be an example which indicates the answer from a student to the question-“What is your role in the society?”,

- “I think there are some things that are expected from me.” (Student 6)

Besides, some students (about 30 percentages) stated that it was difficult for them to answer this question and preferred to skip the question.

Willingness for civic engagement

The vast majority of the participants reported positive attitudes and willingness to participate in community related activities, such as voluntary work or political discussions,

- “I think it is really good to participate in society.....I mean in this time....It is better time...Germany as a country, I think safe here...and to have these, to keep it, you have to do something....Like refugees, but not only such big things...But small things...you can do together with other people....to spend time together, some important topics”. (Student 2)

When it came the reason why they found this kind of activities important, for most of the participants, such activities had a positive impact on society,

- “It is great that people are participating in these kind of activities to make society better...I do believe that peoples’ engagement in these activities help and have impact on society...For example, I am a part of the project which provides support for refugees coming here.” (Student 7)

While for another student, it was her mission and the main inspiration and motivation for her engagement was religion. She explained her opinion as it is illustrated in the following comment,

- “For me...I am Christian and I believe that I have been given an ability to help my fellows...and that’s why I do. I have an ability, while other do not. So, I can do what I can offer.” (Student 8)

Only a few participants were not interested in civic or community related activities and they related it with their fields of study and their irrelevance to civic activities,

- “It is not for me...It is not suitable for my field...I am studying mechanical engineering. I mean our field is...What you say is suitable for people studying social science or business. They are very active in this kind of activities...For example, those who study management...Not me, from mechanical engineering.” (Student 10)

Civic engagement at university

The participants were also asked whether their universities supported and organized civic or community related activities and discussions. Nearly all of the students reported that their universities supported this kind of activities and they saw some announcements about these projects around their campuses,

- “We have this kind of projects for society. We can see flyers on the campus or announcement on the website.” (Student 5)

However, all of the participants reporting the support from their universities stated that this support was only financial or moral, but not organizational. This is how one of the participants explained the situation,

- “You go and say that look, I have this idea or project, that’s why I want my university to give me some funding...They will be more than willing to give the funding to you...However, the university doesn’t do many projects or activities on their own.” (Student 9)

The following comment below by another student studying at another university can also be an example on how things work,

- “I know some friends, they participate in some projects, but they organize these projects themselves ...without participation of university.” (Student 3)

And one of the students explained this situation by calling it ‘German Style’. This is illustrated in the following comment,

- “It is not very German style that university itself organize something...It is German style that they may offer meeting place and fund....All projects I know work in this way...initiatives come from students.” (Student 13)

When the participants were asked whether they were satisfied with the current support and attitudes of their universities to students’ civic engagement, most of them were satisfied, while some not. The participants who were satisfied with their universities’ current practices with respect to students’ civic engagement stated that they had all opportunities if they had any projects or plans,

- “I am quite satisfied...You have all opportunities and if you want to have any projects, you can go and say what you want to do.” (Student 1)

On the other hand, the participants who reported dissatisfaction with this issue explained it with the inactivity of their universities, despite their potentials and called their universities to do more using their potentials,

- “I think university can do more...Definitely...They should do more...I think they [universities] don’t use their potential and opportunities they have.” (Student 7)

Besides, the students were asked about the academics’ attitudes to civic learning and engagement. Nearly all the students stated that they had not heard anything about these issues from their professors and lecturers, as they were busy with teaching their subjects. This is how a student explained the situation which was similar to other students’ descriptions,

- “They [lecturer/tutors] come...teach their lessons and go. That is it. Even they do not have time for other things.” (Student 12)

Lack of civic engagement

Towards the end of the interviews, all the participants who had spent at least a year studying at their universities were asked how many civic projects (for example, voluntary activities, discussions, charities and etc.) organized by their universities they had during their time at university and all of them had the same answer: ‘None’. The following comment by a 7th semester bachelor student who was preparing to graduate can be an example,

- “Unfortunately, not...I have been involved in some projects, but outside the university. The project was not organized by the university.” (Student 14)

Some students reported their non-involvement feeling regret and sorry. This is how the 5th semester bachelor student commented,

- “I don’t remember...but I don’t think so...Sorry.” (Student 2)

Another student’s comment can also be a relevant example,

- “Unfortunately, I have not participated any (civic engagement activities organized by university).” (Student 11)

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight German students’ perceptions of citizenship, their role in society, their civic engagement experience at their universities and their universities’ roles in supporting students’ civic engagement. Especially, the results of this study revealed the diverse and complex understanding of citizenship among young people, different assessments of their roles in society as a citizen, their inactivity in civic activities at university and their expectations from their universities with regard to civic engagement.

For most students, being a citizen meant belonging to a country or place. However, for some of them, it was the only definition they could give to citizenship, while for others, belonging was one of the conditions or characteristics indicating citizenship. This point of view partially reflects McLaughlin’s (1992) ‘minimalist’ approach to citizenship. According to this approach, citizen is a person “who has a certain civil status, with its associated rights, within a community of a certain sort based on the rule of law” (McLaughlin, 1992, p.236).

Another perception of citizenship among the participants was related to having responsibilities for society and government. They mostly talked about their responsibilities as a citizen. This perception of citizenship matches with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) conception of *personally responsible citizenship*. With *personally responsible citizenship*, they describe a citizen as a person who fulfills basic responsibilities such as obeying rules or paying taxes. Personally responsible citizen “acts responsibly in his/her community, works and pays taxes, obey laws, recycles, gives blood, volunteers to lend a hand in time of crisis” (Westheimer and Kahne’s, 2004, p.240).

Only a few students talked about rights when they were asked about their perceptions of citizenship. They stated the importance of rights as a citizen and it was the basis for their definitions of citizenship. Although this perception of citizenship is close to McLaughlin’s (1992) “maximalist” approach, it does not fully reflect this conception of citizenship that includes understanding of community involvement and a shared democratic culture as well. Besides, for only the very small minority of the participants, community involvement was an

important part of their perceptions of citizenship. This perception of citizenship does not fully, but partially reflects Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) concept of *participatory citizenship*, because the participants did not state all the characteristics of *participatory citizenship*. This conception of citizenship refers to a citizen who is an

“active member of community..., organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development or clean up environment, knows how government agencies work, knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks” (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, p.240).

Furthermore, it should be stated that none of the participants talked about values such as social justice or equality, when they were asked about citizenship.

In general, it was difficult for the all students to talk about and define citizenship. The different perceptions of citizenship among the participants revealed the complexity and divergence of definitions of citizenship too. This result is consistent with the studies of several scholars including Banks (2004) and Wood (2014) that indicate the various and complex perceptions of citizenship among young people.

When it comes to how they saw their role in society, for some of them, being a student was a good opportunity to be an active member of society, while for others it was a barrier. They also stated the role of existing expectations from them to construct and form their roles in society. However, some students did not answer the question about what their roles were in society by stating its difficulty and complexity.

Nearly all of the students reported that their universities supported this kind of activities, but not all of them were satisfied with their universities' support. Even, those who were satisfied with the support provided by their universities with respect to civic engagement described this support as moral or financial. As all the students stated, the universities expected initiatives from the students rather than trying to launch new initiatives to engage the students with civic activities.

When the students were asked about civic engagement, most of the participants had positive approaches and reported willingness. The findings support the notion that young people are happy to be involved in different kind of civic activities. When it comes to the students reporting unwillingness to civic engagement, they explained it with the irrelevance between their field of study and civic activities. It indicated an existing misunderstanding among young people about civic engagement: they considered civic engagement as activities related to Social Sciences and Humanities. Besides, nearly all the students stated that they had not heard anything about these issues from their professors and lecturers, as they were busy with

teaching their subjects. This is consistent with the study of Jackson and Shaw (2002) who state that most academics are mainly concerned and interested in the subject content of their teaching.

Interestingly, although, most students reported willingness towards civic engagement/activities, none of them participated in such activities organized by their universities during their studies and all of them felt repentant and shy when they acknowledged their non-engagement. This kind of high disengagement may be the result of demotivation among students or poor organization and management of universities. Even, there have already been some calls to higher education institutions to cooperate and develop the situation with regard to civic engagement, motivation and achievement (see, for example, Holland (2014)).

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that diverse and complex understanding of citizenship exist among young people. It also showed how young people had different assessments of their roles in society as a citizen. Even for some of them, it was difficult to grasp and evaluate their roles in society. Students' inactivity in civic activities at university and their expectations from their universities with regard to civic engagement were revealed too.

Although, nearly all of the students reported the support from their universities for this kind of activities, not all of them were satisfied with their universities' support. Even, those who were satisfied with the support provided by their universities with respect to civic engagement described this support as moral or financial. According to the findings, this study recommends for higher education institutions in Germany to rethink about their inactivity, potential and possibilities to provide more opportunities for students' engagement such as community related activities or discussion platforms.

“Opportunities which stimulates young people’s curiosity, interest and engagement, and involve them in thinking and learning about issues which promote an ethic of care, compassion and commitment to diverse community concerns throughout their lives are essential for informed and active citizenship”. (Henderson and Tudball, 2016, p.15).

As the students described, the universities expected initiatives from the students rather than trying to launch new initiatives to engage the students with civic activities. This may be a good opportunity for the students who are initiative and active in these kinds of events, but relatively passive students should also be taken into account. For this, the German universities need to increase their attention on organization, rather than only providing financial or moral support for these events.

Most of the participants had positive approaches and reported willingness to civic engagement. When it comes to the students reporting unwillingness to civic engagement, they explained it with the irrelevance between their field of study and civic activities. They considered civic engagement as activities related to Social Sciences and Humanities. Besides, nearly all the students stated that they had not heard anything about these issues from their professors and lecturers, as they were busy with teaching their subjects. Here academic staff such as lecturers and tutors need to make a place in their curriculums for discussions of some community related issues, despite their subjects or field of study.

When it comes students' participations in civic activities organized by their universities, all of them reported non-involvement during their studies. The high disengagement of students may be the result of demotivation among them or poor organization and management of universities. In both cases, universities need to rethink their leadership and approaches toward to students' civic engagement.

Taking into account the fact that this is a small-scale qualitative study involving participants from five German higher education institutions, further study with students from other universities is recommended. There is also need for further study including university managers and academic staff to explore what they think.

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