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STUDENT PERCEPTION IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ALBANIA, NORTH MACEDONIA, AND SERBIA

OPEN SOCIETY
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WESTERN BALKANS

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Introduction

This document provides a comprehensive analysis of student perceptions and engagement in student governments in three Western Balkan countries: Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The study, conducted under the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme 2024 (RYLMP), examines the awareness, involvement, and perceptions of students about their representative bodies in universities. The findings highlight significant gaps in information, participation, and trust across all three countries. It also sheds light on the current situation of student representation in the region by providing an overview of the legal provisions and their student representative bodies[1] in terms of their accountability, transparency, and effectiveness offering targeted recommendations for governments, universities, and student governments.

The analysis of the national legal provisions of each country shows that the competencies[2] and structure of student representative bodies are conceptualized differently. According to the legal provisions of North Macedonia and Serbia, student assemblies are responsible for representing and protecting the rights of students and appointing student representatives in the decision-making bodies of the university, while in the case of Albania student councils' competencies are limited to expressing opinions, promoting participation and coordinating student representation in the university/faculty level. From promoting democratic values in the case of North Macedonia to discriminatory elections provisions and unfair registration procedures of organizations in Serbia, all the way to fragmented weak representation and lack of clarity in the case of Albania, the legal provisions have a great impact on the quality of student representation.

Methodology

This report employed a mixed-method approach, integrating desk research, quantitative survey, and qualitative focus group discussion to gather comprehensive data on students' perceptions and challenges with student representative bodies in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The initial stage involved a thorough review of existing literature, including academic papers, reports, and policy documents related to student assemblies, student participation, and higher education governance in each country. This was followed by an analysis of the Law on Higher Education, the statutes governing the University Assembly, and the statutes of individual faculties conducted to understand the legal and institutional frameworks within which student representative bodies operate. Secondary data from university reports, previous surveys, and studies on student engagement were additionally collected and analyzed to establish a baseline understanding of the context and identify existing gaps.

The quantitative survey included targeted population consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Tirana in Albania, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University (UKIM) in North Macedonia, and the University of Novi Sad in Serbia.

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1   Student representative body refers to student assemblies in the case of North Macedonia and Serbia and Student Councils in Albania
2   Roles

The survey had a total of 52 questions organized into 4 main research areas:

1. Level of information on student representation, including main sources of information

2. Student perception of transparency, inclusion in the decision-making process, accountability, and effectiveness of student representative bodies

3. Participation in activities organized by Student Representative bodies (with customized sections for participating and non-participating respondents)

4. Participation in the electoral process (with customized sections for respondents who voted and did not vote)

The survey was translated into Albanian, Macedonian, and Serbian and was separately administrated by each of the researchers from May to June 2024. The survey was disseminated via university mailing lists, social media platforms, and online student communities.

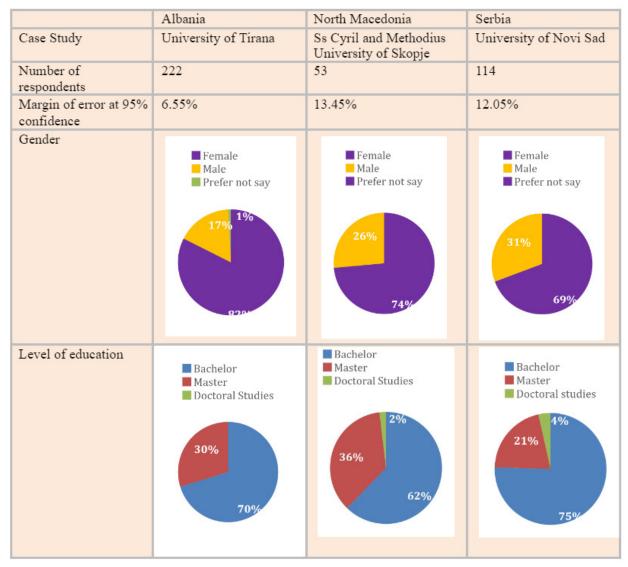|	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Case Study	University of Tirana	Ss Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje	University of Novi Sad
Number of respondents	222	53	114
Margin of error at 95% confidence	6.55%	13.45%	12.05%
Gender	Female / Male / Prefer not say — 82%, 17%, 1%	Female / Male / Prefer not say — 74%, 26%	Female / Male / Prefer not say — 69%, 31%
Level of education	Bachelor 70%, Master 30%	Bachelor 62%, Master 36%, Doctoral Studies 2%	Bachelor 75%, Master 21%, Doctoral studies 4%

Table 1. Survey sample per country

Lastly, the qualitative focus groups included participants who voluntarily applied through the survey to participate in a follow-up discussion. A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to explore in-depth the students' experiences with student assemblies, their reasons for participation or non-participation, and their perceptions of the assemblies' impact. Focus group sessions were conducted in each country, each lasting 60-90 minutes. Transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes and sub-themes, which were then

interpreted to understand the deeper insights and contextual factors influencing student perceptions.

Country	No. of participants	Gender		Study Cycle	
		Female	Male	Bachelor	Master
Albania	6	3	3	2	4
North Macedonia	10	8	2		
Serbia	7			10	

Table 2. Focus group composition

Merits and Limits

The quantitative survey included targeted population consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate students from universities in Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. Separate surveys were conducted for each country due to the different regulations and systems on student organizing and governance. This approach ensured that each survey was tailored to the specific legal and institutional contexts of each country.

Responses from Serbia and Albania were significantly higher than those from North Macedonia, resulting in a potential discrepancy in the findings. The more substantial number of responses from Serbia and Albania might provide a clearer and more representative outlook of student perceptions in those countries. In contrast, the limited responses and lack of diversity in the online survey for North Macedonia present significant limitation. This limitation potentially affects the generalizability of the findings, as the survey might not capture a broad range of perspectives, particularly those of minority groups or students facing difficulties.

Despite using multiple channels of communication, and leveraging connections, many students in North Macedonia were not interested in participating. This disinterest was largely due to the survey's length and the time required to read and respond, as revealed by some participants. The challenge was exacerbated by the timing of the survey distribution during exam season when students were primarily focused on their studies, making outreach efforts particularly difficult in Skopje.

Albania

Overview

Albania's journey in the higher education reform is deeply rooted in its transition from a totalitarian communist regime to a democratic one. The reforms, aimed at modernizing the education system, focused on aligning Albanian universities with the European Higher Education Area. Despite these efforts, challenges persist in ensuring that student representation is truly effective and meaningful.

The research found that although a legal framework is in place, practical implementation of legal provisions and regulations on student representation is lacking. Students are often unaware of their rights to participate in university governance, partly due to the complex bureaucratic structures that govern universities. Additionally, there is a significant gap between what the law stipulates and what is practiced on the ground. Many students reported that they were only made aware of student government activities during election periods, which further alienated them from the governance process.

The problem of political interference in student elections is particularly acute in Albania. Political parties often use student governments as training ground for young politicians, which undermines the independence and credibility of these bodies. As a result, many students perceive the elections as predetermined and thus do not participate. This perception is compounded by lack of transparency in the manner of selecting candidates and how votes are counted.

Moreover, the effectiveness of student governments is further compromised by their limited resources. In many cases, student governments do not receive adequate funding from universities, which restricts their ability to carry out activities that could engage and inform the student body. This lack of resources also limits their ability to challenge university administrations on issues that affect students.

To address these challenges, the recommendations emphasize the need for a multi-faceted approach that includes legal reforms, improved communication strategies, and increased funding for student governments. By creating a more transparent and inclusive system, Albanian universities can ensure that student representation is not just a formality but a vital part of university governance.

Research Findings

The research revealed that students in Albania are largely unaware of the existence and functions of student representative bodies. There is a widespread lack of information regarding electoral processes, roles, and responsibilities of student representatives. Many students expressed frustration with the low visibility of student governance activities, and a considerable number felt excluded from decision-making processes.

Transparency in the election process was another major concern. The legitimacy of student elections was questioned by a significant portion of the student body that felt that elections were neither transparent nor fair. The involvement of political parties in student elections was highlighted as a particular problem, with many students believing that elections were influenced by external factors.

In 2018, Albania saw widespread student protests sparked by a government decision to impose additional fees on students retaking exams. What began as a response to this financial burden quickly grew into a broader movement against the poor quality of education, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of academic freedom in Albanian universities. The protests, which involved thousands of students across the country, pressured the government into announcing the "Pact for the University" (Pakti për Universitetin).

This Pact included reforms such as the reduction of retake fees, improved transparency and accountability in university governance, better infrastructure, and enhanced student representation through promised elections in all public universities by June 2019. However, skepticism prevailed among students, who questioned the government's commitment to these reforms and raised concerns about the transparency of the electoral process and the influence of political parties.

The 2018 protests and the resulting Pact highlighted the power of student activism in Albania and underscored the ongoing challenges in reforming the country's higher education system.

Recommendations

Ministry of Education and Sport in Albania (long-term)

- Amend the Law No.80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research by:

  - Transferring the authority for announcing Student Council elections to the University Rector to ensure consistent and timely election cycles.

  - Transforming the role of Student Councils from independent student bodies with no influence in decision-making to representative assemblies responsible for appointing student representatives in all decision-making bodies within the institution, following the model of the Law on Higher Education of the Republic of North Macedonia.

  - Establishing clear authority for the Student Ombudsman within the framework of the regulations governing student representation, to safeguard students' rights and ensure accountability of Student Council's activities.

  - Ensuring that student representatives, appointed by the University's Student Council, are included in key decision-making bodies such as the Rectorate and the Dean's Office.

  - Introducing student representatives at the departmental level, in line with the British model, to enhance student involvement in curriculum development and academic decision-making.

University of Tirana (short-term)

- Host a consultation process with students to amend the Rulebook for the First Elections of the Student Councils at the University of Tirana

- Amend the Rulebook for the First Elections of the Student Council of the University of Tirana by:

  - Expanding the responsibilities of the Institutional Commission of Student Elections (KIZS) to verify the student status of each elected representative at the start of every academic year, ensuring the functionality and legitimacy of Student Councils.

  - Establishing procedures for holding partial elections in the event of vacancies.

- Organize the Student Council elections.

- Amend the Statute and Rulebook of the University of Tirana by:

  - Ensuring the appointment of student representatives in the Rectorate and Dean's Office by implementing the legal provisions of Article 42, 1e, and Article 40 of Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research.

  - Assigning the responsibility of announcing Student Council elections to the Rector, in accordance with Article 99, 3 of the Law on Higher Education.

- Provide newly elected Councils with comprehensive information on the procedures for accessing budgets, drafting statutes, and institutional support for budget proposals.

- Ensure that Student Councils have dedicated office space in every faculty.

- Enhance transparency by:

  - Publishing the names, CVs, contact information, and Statutes of every student representative on dedicated subpages integrated within the university and faculties' websites.

  - Promoting Student Council events through the university's online platforms.

Student Councils

- Establish Student Unions as a way to include more students in the decision-making process of the Student Council

- Increase on-site presence among student bodies to disseminate information and collect feedback to strengthen legitimacy among students.

- Draft and publish an annual activity plan with specific goals and targets and follow-up with an annual report, including activities organized and budgeted to ensure the accountability and transparency of Student C ouncils.

- Lobby your faculty/university to designate space on their website for publishing all decisions, documents, and notifications from Student Councils on regular basis.

- Establish a strong social media presence to disseminate information, increase visibility, and ensure transparency of Student Council's activities

- Establish internal procedures to ensure institutional memory of Student Councils. Ex. Procedure to hand over all documents to newly elected Student Councils, foreseeing positive practices within Statutes, etc.

- Establish connections with student representatives in the Senate of the University and Special Commissions to strengthen the voice of students in the decision-making process of the university.

Civil Society Organizations

- Offer capacity-building programmes to Student Councils,

- Monitor the performance of Student Councils,

- Collaborate with Student Councils to organize social/academic activities.

North Macedonia

Overview

In North Macedonia, the challenges of student governance are deeply intertwined with the country's broader political and social landscape. Since independence, North Macedonia has faced ongoing political instability, which has permeated all aspects of public life, including higher education. This instability had a significant impact on the effectiveness and independence of student governance, reflecting the broader struggles within the country's political environment.

Research revealed that the legal framework for student representation in North Macedonia is relatively robust, but there are significant gaps in its implementation. Many students are aware of their representative bodies but feel disconnected from the decision-making processes. This disconnect is partly due to the perception that student governments are more symbolic than functional, serving as a checkbox rather than a platform for genuine student participation.

Another major issue identified was the limited scope of student government powers. In many universities, student governments have little say in major decisions that affect students, such as tuition fees, academic policies, and campus facilities. This has led to a sense of apathy among students, who feel that their representatives need help to influence significant changes.

In addition, the study highlighted concerns about the transparency and fairness of student elections. In some cases, students reported that elections were organized in a manner that favoured certain candidates, often those with connections to political parties or university administrations. This has led to low voter turnout and lack of trust in the electoral process.

The recommendations for North Macedonia focus on enhancing the accountability and visibility of student governments. Universities can rebuild trust in student governance by empowering student representatives with more decision-making authority and ensuring that elections are conducted fairly and transparently. Furthermore, there is a need for greater efforts to educate students about their rights and the importance of participating in university governance.

Overall, the study suggests that while the framework for student representation exists, its effectiveness is undermined by political influences, limited powers, and lack of engagement from the student body.

Research Findings

In North Macedonia, the research showed that students have a moderate level of awareness about their student representative bodies, but this awareness needs to translate into active participation. Many students are aware of the existence of student governments, but they feel disconnected from the processes, perceiving them as ineffective and unrepresentative.

The study highlighted that a significant number of students did not participate in elections because they did not believe their vote would make a difference. There were also concerns about the lack of accountability of student representatives and the overall transparency of the governance process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Student perceptions of student assemblies and elections at the university Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, North Macedonia are largely characterized by disengagement and skepticism. Many students are unaware of the assemblies' activities, and even among those who are informed, participation remains low. Half of the students knew about recent student elections but chose not to vote, while a significant portion was unaware that the elections were even happening. The assemblies are often seen as more talk than action, with many students doubting their credibility and effectiveness.

The research suggests several measures that could address these challenges and improve student engagement and satisfaction.

Recommendations for Student Assemblies

- Increase Awareness: Student assemblies should actively raise awareness of their roles and the importance of student participation in advocating for student rights. By showcasing successful and meaningful changes introduced by student bodies globally, they can highlight how these efforts significantly improve the quality of student life.

- Increase Visibility and Connection: Candidates should be more present and interactive within the student community. Engaging in informal interactions and showing commitment through actions can build trust and support. Candidates should actively participate in informal interactions, attend various student events, and be accessible for discussions and feedback. By being more present and interactive, candidates can demonstrate their commitment to addressing student needs and concerns.

- Organize Campaigns on Ageism: To address ageism and foster intergenerational respect, launch a comprehensive awareness campaign. Focus on educational workshops, engaging social media content, and intergenerational activities. Collaborate with local organizations and influential figures to amplify the message. Regularly gather feedback to assess and improve the campaign's effectiveness, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

- Improve Information Dissemination: Clear and accessible information about student assemblies, their roles, and the election process should be widely distributed. Making use of multiple channels and ensuring consistent communication can help bridge the informational gap. Such examples include:

  - Multi-channel communication strategy

  Email Campaigns or Discord: Regularly send out informative emails detailing upcoming events, initiatives, and election dates. Ensure these emails are engaging and concise.

  Social media: Leverage popular social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to share updates, create event pages, and engage with students. Regular posts, stories, and live sessions can help maintain consistent presence.

  University Website and Portals: Update the university's official website and student portals with comprehensive information about student assemblies, including their roles, responsibilities, and upcoming activities.

  - Physical Presence and Visibility:

  Maintain physical presence on campus through: Information Booths: Set up booths in high-traffic areas such as libraries, cafeterias, and student centres where assembly members can answer questions and distribute informational materials.

  Posters and Flyers: Use visually appealing posters and flyers to advertise events, elections, and the functions of the student assemblies. Place these in strategic locations around campus.

  - Feedback Mechanisms:

  Implement robust feedback mechanisms where students can share their thoughts and suggestions about the activities and communication of student assemblies. This could be done through online surveys, suggestion boxes, or town hall meetings.

  - Regular Newsletters:

  Publish monthly or bi-monthly newsletters summarizing the achievements, ongoing projects, and plans of student assemblies. This helps in keeping the student body informed and involved.

- Foster Meaningful Activities and Engagement: Organizing more discussions, workshops, and events such as non-formal education training where students can gain practical skills, earn diplomas, network with peers, and meet distinguished professors

can make student assemblies more relevant and beneficial. Practical experience that complement their academic learning can significantly enhance their university experience and advance the practical application of knowledge in everyday life.

- Enhance Trust and Transparency: Building a culture of accountability and transparency within student assemblies can help restore trust. Demonstrating the tangible impacts of their work and involving students in decision-making processes can show that assemblies are more than just formalities. Candidates should showcase their actions and achievements, emphasizing tangible results over mere promises. By actively involving students in decision-making processes and visibly working towards their interests, candidates can build trust and garner more support. This proactive approach can significantly shift the perception of student assemblies from being seen as ineffective to being recognized as influential and credible bodies capable of making meaningful changes in the university environment.

Recommendations for the Government

- Implement Enhanced Transparency and Autonomy: Amend the Law on Higher Education to ensure greater transparency in decision-making processes and increase the autonomy of student assemblies.

- Enforce Dedicated Legislation: Develop a separate law or set of guidelines specifically for student organization and activities, ensuring clarity and accessibility for students.

- Implement Increased Support and Resources: Provide more support and resources for student organizations, including training and awareness programmes on their rights and roles.

- Create Inclusive Participation Mechanisms: Establish more inclusive and participatory mechanisms within university governance to ensure meaningful student involvement.

- Implement Regular Monitoring and Evaluation: Implement regular monitoring and evaluation of student participation and representation practices to identify and address gaps or issues promptly.

By addressing these issues and implementing these suggestions, student assemblies can become more effective, trusted, and integral parts of the university experience, leading to greater student participation and satisfaction.

Serbia

Short overview

Serbia's experience with student governance is shaped by its turbulent political history and the legacy of its student movements. The 1968 protests are often cited as a defining moment in Serbian student activism, but the current landscape is marked by a different set of challenges.

Research shows that students in both Serbia and Albania face similar challenges regarding their student governments. While students are generally aware of their representative bodies, there is widespread skepticism about their effectiveness. This skepticism stems largely from the perception that student governments are heavily influenced by political parties. The involvement of external political actors in student elections has led many Serbian students to question the independence of their representatives, with some viewing these bodies as mere extensions of political organizations rather than autonomous entities representing student interests.

This situation mirrors the experience of students in Albania, where concerns about the transparency and fairness of student elections are also prevalent. Like in Serbia, Albanian students are wary of the influence that political parties have on their student governments. The protests in Albania, which led to the "Pact for the University" highlighted these issues, but skepticism about genuine reform remains.

The mutual challenge faced by youth in both Serbia and Albania lies in the struggle for truly independent and effective student representation. In both countries, student governments are often perceived as compromised by political interference, undermining their role as advocates for student interests and contributing to a broader sense of disenchantment with the higher education system.

The issue of transparency was also highlighted in the study. Many students expressed concerns about the lack of clear communication from student governments regarding their activities, budgets, and decision-making processes. This lack of transparency has contributed to a general mistrust of student representatives, leading to low levels of engagement and participation in elections.

Furthermore, the study revealed that student governments in Serbia often struggle with limited resources and lack of institutional support. Without adequate funding, student representatives are unable to organize events, conduct outreach, or effectively advocate for student needs. This has resulted in a cycle of disengagement, where students feel disconnected from their representatives, and student governments are unable to fulfill their mandates.

To address these issues, the recommendations call for stronger legal protections for the independence of student governments, as well as measures to ensure greater transparency in their operations. Universities are also encouraged to provide more support to student governments, both in terms of funding and institutional backing. Financial support should be part of Action Plans and the existing strategies for the implementation of the Law on Youth and other relevant documents for the student population. By creating an environment where student representatives can operate independently and effectively, Serbian universities can foster a more vibrant and participatory student governance culture.

The study concludes that while Serbia has a rich history of student activism, the current challenges require renewed focus on ensuring truly representative student governments, free from external influences.

Research Findings

Research indicated that students in Serbia are somewhat aware of their representative bodies but are skeptical about their effectiveness. There is a significant mistrust in the student electoral process, with many students believing that elections are manipulated or influenced by political parties. This has led to low voter turnout and general apathy towards student government activities.

Furthermore, the research found that the lack of transparency in financial matters and decision-making processes further erodes trust in student representative bodies. Students feel that their concerns are not adequately addressed by their representatives, leading to disconnect between the student body and student government.

Recommendations

Formation of an Independent Body to Monitor Student Parliaments

While student parliaments are autonomous entities, it is essential to safeguard their independence while also recognizing the need for oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability. An independent monitoring body could be established to oversee the work of student parliaments, promote student-centric activities, and supervise the election process for student parliament members.

Independent Monitoring Body Structure:

- Comprised of 5 members.

- Members are elected through a dedicated election process at each faculty.

- Two members are professors, elected by the Teaching-Scientific Councils.

- Three members are students who apply independently.

- Student members must not be involved in any student organization or the Student Parliament at their respective faculties, nor can they be candidates in the Student Parliament elections.

- Elections for the independent monitoring body are held annually.

Responsibilities of the Independent Monitoring Body:

- Promote transparency in the operations of Student Parliaments.

- Ensure the integrity and legitimacy of the election process.

- Encourage campaigns to increase voter turnout.

- Monitor potential violations of laws or internal regulations.

- Offer recommendations to improve the functioning of Student Parliaments.

- Facilitate regular meetings between female students and Student Parliament members.

- Report irregularities in the work of the Student Parliament.

- Conduct surveys to assess the opinions of female students on the Parliament's performance.

The establishment of such a body would enhance the legitimacy of both the work of the Student Parliaments and the election process, contributing to the democratization of the student community and improving the overall quality of education.

Amendments to the Law on Student Organizations

To improve the legitimacy of Student Parliament elections, two key amendments to the Law on Student Organizations are necessary:

- The law should clearly define the election procedures for Student Parliament members, rather than leaving them to be determined by Student Parliaments themselves.

  A revision to Article 7 of the Law on Student Organizations would achieve this, ensuring a more standardized election process across institutions.

- The law must also outline the structure of election commissions and polling boards, as these are the main bodies responsible for conducting elections. It is common

democratic practice for each election participant to have at least one representative in the election commission and on polling boards (commonly referred to as "box controllers").

If these amendments are adopted, the Law on Student Organizations would significantly enhance the democratic process and legitimacy of Student Parliament elections.

Conclusion

In examining the state of affairs in student governance across Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, it becomes evident that while the specific challenges and recommended interventions may differ from country to country, there is a shared and pressing need for systemic reform across the Western Balkans. Central to this is the imperative to enhance transparency, accountability, and active student engagement within higher education governance.

The pervasive influence of political actors and the resulting skepticism towards student governments highlight the urgent need for more robust mechanisms of oversight and control. Without such mechanisms, student bodies risk being perceived as mere extensions of external political interests rather than independent entities advocating for the genuine needs and concerns of the student population.

To address these challenges, both governmental and institutional reforms are crucial. Governments must commit to creating and enforcing policies that ensure fair and transparent student elections, free from political interference. Institutions, on the other hand, must prioritize the development of frameworks that empower students to participate meaningfully in governance processes, thereby strengthening the democratic foundations of their universities.

These systemic changes are not merely optional but essential for fostering a more participatory and democratic student governance system across the region. By introducing concrete mechanisms of control and support, the Western Balkans can create an educational environment where student voices are heard, respected, and influential in shaping the future of higher education. Only through such comprehensive and coordinated efforts can the region hope to overcome the entrenched challenges and move towards a more inclusive and accountable system of student governance.

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