

Student participation – Shaping higher education together

(Dr. Stephanie Rottmeier in conversation with Ira Helten)

Stephanie Rottmeier:

Hello and a warm welcome to today's podcast episode. My name is Stephanie Rottmeier, and my guest today is Ira Helten, formerly the first student member of the Executive Board at the European University Viadrina. In this role, she represented students at the highest level. She attended Executive Board meetings and ensured that the student perspective was taken into account in key decisions made by the university management. She also helped improve communication between university management and students. Ira, a very warm welcome, and thank you so much for taking the time to join us today.

Ira Helten:

Thank you so much for inviting me, Stephanie.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

During your term, you helped shape a number of important initiatives at the university. Looking back, what surprised you most when you first stepped into the role?

Ira Helten:

What surprised me most - especially as the first student to serve on the Executive Board - was just how many issues affecting students are discussed at that level. Until then, students had not been directly involved in those discussions. At the same time, the student position on the Executive Board is by no means the only way for students to contribute their perspectives. We have a wide range of bodies, both within student self-government and the university administration, where students can actively participate and make their voices heard. Still, I was genuinely surprised by how many issues affecting students have been discussed by the Executive Board throughout Viadrina's 35-year history without students being present at the table. Given how many important decisions are made at this level, I could certainly see the AStA—the General Student Committee—being invited to Executive Board meetings more regularly. I believe the foundation for closer cooperation has always been there, and the channels of communication have always existed.

But involving students as a matter, of course, is still something that is lacking in many situations, and I keep noticing this time and again. Even when decisions concern students directly, they are often taken into account as a group without actually being involved in the decision-making process itself, and I think that is a real shame. At the same time, I realised that my experience in student self-government was a tremendous advantage. It meant I could contribute my own knowledge and insights from the very beginning, rather than having to rely entirely on the experience of others. I was able to draw on everything I had learned through my work in the AStA, the Student Representative Council, and other university bodies, bring those perspectives to the Executive Board, and later pass on what I had learned to others. Looking back, that experience was invaluable and made it much easier for me. On the other hand, I relied heavily on other universities and on student members of Executive Boards and student vice-presidents sharing their experiences with me, because I was establishing this role from scratch. There was no one at Viadrina who had first-hand experience of the position and could tell me what to expect. I realised quite early on, even before taking up the role in April 2025, that it needed to be institutionally embedded and couldn't depend on one individual alone.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

Rather, it's simply a matter of involving more students. In meetings like these, issues that affect students—albeit sometimes only indirectly—are certainly often discussed. That's why it would make sense, for example, to shape everyday university life together and make decisions jointly. But how can students get involved? What does student participation look like to you, for example? And where do you see the greatest potential for this kind of co-determination?

Ira Helten:

Participation is about more than just committee work. I'm incredibly proud of how many students are able to get involved in campus life and how many can also play an active role within the university through the various committees we have—both through student self-governance and through university committees. At the same time, I believe that real participation begins where students can genuinely contribute to decision-making processes—where they are not merely taken into account, but also have a seat at the table, can voice their own opinions, and, most importantly, have a real say in decisions. In other words, the student perspective shouldn't just be a nice add-on that people listen to and occasionally take into consideration; students should have a voice of their own. I believe that the student vice-presidency can certainly help promote this kind of participation, because it ensures that student perspectives are reliably brought to the right places—particularly within the university's governing bodies—and that students are involved in a wide range of processes. At the same time, I think we need to go much further and engage with the full diversity of university life. And not just with university governance, events, or campus life, but also with teaching—for example, by enabling students to help shape seminars, contribute to their design, put forward their own ideas, and, through student co-teaching, actively help shape seminars themselves. I've had the opportunity to do this several times at Viadrina as well, and each time I've been able to develop

seminars together with lecturers—from the initial concept and idea right through to implementation and evaluation. It makes a huge difference whether it's a student standing at the front of the room, at the whiteboard or the lectern, rather than a lecturer, because it helps break down hierarchies. And the fact that you already know some of the students also makes these seminar formats really interesting. At the same time, from the other perspective—not that of a lecturer, but as a student myself—I can bring the student perspective into the teaching format, help develop new approaches, make suggestions, and, of course, put them into practice, for example by exploring how seminars could be organised differently in the future. I think that's what makes it so exciting. I generally find that processes in which students are involved—especially for the first time—are particularly exciting, because students bring completely fresh, unbiased perspectives based on their own experiences. Take campus life, for example: students spend a large part of their day on campus, so they're probably the ones best placed to say which light is broken, which room needs repairing, or where something is missing. After all, we know the campus almost like our own living room. That's why it's incredibly important that students' views count, are listened to, and are actively sought, because the campus is, ultimately, designed primarily for students—the university's largest group. The same applies to teaching, where lecturers are faced with any number of students. Of course, lecturers are usually open to students' suggestions—it doesn't always have to involve student co-teaching, for example—but it is a completely new experience for students to help shape seminars, to be on the other side themselves, and to be given the opportunity to take on that role before, in turn, making the same opportunity possible for others. It is, of course, a reversal of roles. But that brings with it a wealth of experiences and perspectives, as well as a much deeper understanding of the different roles involved. And I believe that fostering this is essential for the future of universities.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

Yes, you mentioned helping to shape your own living room, bringing your own perspective to bear, and making your own voice heard. There are opportunities—many organisations offer students ways to get involved or invite them to participate. But often, students don't take advantage of these opportunities. What do you think prevents students from getting involved, from shaping their own living room, and from making their mark? And how can we reach those who haven't participated so far?

Ira Helten:

Getting involved is, after all, primarily a voluntary and unpaid commitment. At the same time, students are, of course, also members of the university. And if you look at the statutes, the constitutions of most universities state that all members should participate in the university's development. That also means that students are not customers of the university; they are members with equal rights, just like all staff, professors, and those who serve on the university's governing bodies. It's incredibly important to strengthen this understanding—that the voluntary roles students take on are, of course, unpaid, unlike many other roles within the university. Anyone within the university community who goes the extra mile for their university deserves recognition. On the other hand, students naturally face even greater challenges

when it comes to time and financial pressures. Many have to decide whether to prepare for a Senate meeting or an AStA meeting, whether to go to work instead, or whether they simply want some free time to spend with friends. This increasingly pressing question of how to finance my studies, how to balance studying with work and voluntary commitments, and still find time for my family, my friends, or other things like sport and hobbies—it's becoming more and more difficult to fit all of this into everyday life. I'm from Frankfurt (Oder) and I study at Viadrina University. The cost of living here is still very low, and I'm incredibly grateful that studying at this university makes that possible and also gives me the opportunity to get involved in voluntary work. It means that alongside my studies, I'm able to develop additional skills and gain new experiences through volunteering. I'd say that's one of the greatest gifts of university life. But for many students, that simply isn't the reality. The bigger the city and the bigger the university, the more expensive life becomes, and the harder it is to find the time to get involved. I think another issue is that participation often feels quite abstract. It can also seem like a bit of a black box—you don't really know what you're getting into or how to get involved. You might want to participate, but simply not know where to start or where to find the relevant information. And this isn't just about elections; it's also about the day-to-day work of student bodies and what they actually do for students. I think that journey from initial interest to active involvement is often what makes it difficult for many students—even those who are especially motivated to get involved—to reach the point where they can actually make a contribution. How we reach students is a very good question. There are various formats we can try. At Viadrina, in my role as student vice-president, I had the opportunity to experiment with different formats together with Bonny Brandenburger. We presented topics relating to the ongoing reform process in events designed specifically for students, held in a space without lecturers and without the usual structural hierarchies that students are familiar with from teaching or from university life more generally. One thing universities can do—which also helps address the financial challenges—is to recognise committee work as part of a student's studies or to provide expense allowances. Recognising committee work as academic credit is something that student councils, in particular, or student self-governing bodies more broadly, can help make possible. Student unions or student councils, where these structures exist, can also provide expense allowances specifically for this kind of work. Naturally, this lowers the barrier to getting involved and increases motivation to participate, because students receive something in return. And it can also be a way of making engagement feel more natural. The other thing I've learned is that, no matter how many posters you put up, how many leaflets you hand out, how strong your social media presence is, or how many newsletters you send out—whether as a student council or any other body—nothing beats talking to people face to face. Of course, that's also the most labour-intensive approach. But nothing is more effective than speaking to people in person. It achieves far more than any call to action you could post, and a conversation naturally creates a much stronger connection than a mailing list ever can. You engage directly with students. You can respond to their initial questions, address their expectations and preconceptions in a much more targeted and personal way, and really enter into a dialogue. Whether you're trying to recruit students for student bodies or gather students' views for the university—on issues that should absolutely be answered by students—there are countless ways to do it: conducting surveys

outside the canteen, speaking to commuters outside the station if you're at a commuter university, and many more besides. These approaches are, of course, extremely labour-intensive because they involve speaking to people directly and personally. But if you really want to try them and see the results for yourself, I can only encourage you to take this to heart and put it into practice for an important issue. At the same time, there are, of course, many other formats that are much easier to implement and give students straightforward opportunities to get involved. These include pop-up stands, all kinds of printed materials and graphics, and social media. I'd always recommend going to the places where students naturally spend their time anyway—the student club, the canteen, or even the halls of residence group chats that already exist—and bringing these topics into those spaces. It's also important to have allies within the student unions who can help spread the word and encourage others to get involved. That can be incredibly valuable, and it has certainly made it much easier for us to identify issues and make decisions. Of course, it's impossible to reach every student. Even when we've discussed the biggest issues affecting the student body, that doesn't mean that more than 50 per cent of students will say, "I really want to share my opinion on this right now." But perhaps that's also part of the challenge: we need to engage students on the issues themselves rather than assume that everyone keeps up to date every day—through a mailing list, the university website, or social media with everything the university is doing or everything that's happening on campus. One final point that comes to mind is that we also need to actively include international students. They make up an increasingly large proportion of the student body, and they too should be represented—both within student representation and across the university more broadly. That also means adapting our formats and the languages we use to ensure that all students are able to participate.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

Thank you very much. You've already shared a number of recommendations for universities and for the various stakeholders within them. You also mentioned student councils earlier. What would you like to see in terms of cooperation between university management, student councils, and the wider student body. Especially students who aren't yet involved in any committees or members of a student council? What kind of cooperation between these groups would you like to see?

Ira Helten:

First and foremost, what I hope for in terms of collaboration is that everyone involved genuinely wants that collaboration to happen. That makes it much easier to begin working together, to have meaningful discussions and exchanges, and to ensure that those exchanges take place on an equal footing and become a natural part of the process from the very beginning. We're all familiar with the saying that students should have a seat at the table, and I do think that's true. But I once heard a slightly different version from the former IRUA president. She said that students shouldn't just have a seat at the table, they should help build the table. That's something I experienced time and again at the beginning of my term in office, because my role within the Presidential Council had been created by many different people—but not by students who had been involved in the process or had the opportunity to contribute the

student perspective. Whether it was the job description, the structure of the role, or the number of hours allocated, every aspect of the position was designed by people who hold distinguished professorships and senior leadership roles, but who naturally cannot fully see things from a student's perspective or incorporate that perspective into their work. That's why, when it comes to collaboration, I'd particularly like to see students' views taken into account from the very beginning and for students to be involved in these processes as a matter of course. That takes time and, above all, a great deal of commitment from everyone involved. But if students are brought into these processes and are then able to work on an equal footing and have a real say, that would be a fantastic development for universities. A genuine sense of equality also grows through working together—by collaborating on different projects over a longer period of time. I believe that student co-teaching, in particular, is an excellent way of fostering this across several areas at once. It means that collaboration doesn't have to focus solely on university governance; responsibility can also be shared through teaching, for example.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

There are actually quite a few wishes in there, and since we're on the subject of wishes, let's stay with that for a moment. If you could change one thing at the university tomorrow, what would it be, and why?

Ira Helten:

One thing I would change straight away would be to involve students in decision-making processes at an earlier stage and in a more meaningful way. Being involved from the beginning of a process has a significant impact on the decisions that are made. Being brought in only at the end, on the other hand, often serves little more than to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been taken. By that stage, the student perspective is generally missing. I think it's absolutely vital to recognise that students can be experts in their own studies. Not necessarily in the history of higher education or in how a degree programme should be structured, but in the practical, day-to-day reality of studying, of life on campus, and of how students organise their studies. Do the Moodle courses we have actually work? Do the thousand emails we receive every day achieve what they're supposed to? What other resources do we need? Which new formats do we want to try? These are all aspects that shouldn't be underestimated. At the same time, this also requires a culture of cooperation and collaboration, a culture of enabling others and one in which participation is expected as a matter of course. That's why one thing I would change immediately, and something I would like to see universities adopt more widely, is creating structures such as a student vice-presidency that can bridge the gap between students and the university. I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel. I believe we already have excellent structures in place, both within the university and within student self-governance. The student vice-presidency simply complements the existing channels of communication. At the same time, I think that exchanges between universities help highlight what is working well in different places and what can be adapted or replicated elsewhere. Those insights can then be fed back into existing communication channels and incorporated into their processes.

Stephanie Rottmeier:

That's brilliant, thank you very much. I think that's a lovely note to end on: students are also experts in their own degree programmes.

Thank you very much, Ira, for your time and for sharing your insights on student participation in higher education. And thank you very much for talking to us today.

Ira Helten:

Yes, thank you so, so much, Stephanie, for the invitation and for giving me the opportunity to share a little about my experiences.