

Extracurricular Activities in Higher Education: Challenges, Economic Implications, and Practices in Armenia and the EU

Arusyak Aleksanyan¹, Narine Manukyan^{2,*}, Nensi Mkrtchyan³, Rafal Rebilas⁴, Narine Vardanyan⁵

¹ Center for European Studies, Yerevan State University, Armenia
ORCID: 0000-0002-1729-1532
e-mail: arusyak.aleksanyan@ysu.am

² Institute for Informatics and Automation Problems of NAS, Armenia
ORCID: 0000-0002-2648-8003
e-mail: nana@sci.am

³ EU Delegation, Armenia
ORCID: 0000-0003-4689-9552
e-mail: nensi.mkrtchyan@coleurope.eu

⁴ WSB University, Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0001-7926-1155
e-mail: rrebilas@wsb.edu.pl

⁵ International Scientific-Educational Center of NAS, Armenia
ORCID: 0000-0001-8412-7495
e-mail: narine.vardanyan@isec.am

* Corresponding author: Narine Manukyan, nana@sci.am

Abstract

This paper explores the role of extracurricular activities (ECAs), specifically student self-government, in fostering leadership and entrepreneurial competencies in Armenian higher education. This case study examines educational management and provides insights relevant to other transition economies, with comparative lessons from Sweden and Poland. ECAs emerge as major drivers of human capital formation by enhancing employability, civic participation, and career readiness: qualities increasingly sought by evolving labour markets. Despite these benefits, many higher education governance systems encounter considerable legislative and institutional limitations on the effectiveness of ECAs and student self-management. This study uses qualitative research methods such as document analysis, focus groups, and SWOT analysis to identify legislative loopholes, institutional vulnerabilities and untapped opportunities in transition economies such as Armenia. The study aims to explore how EU best practices can be assimilated to enhance student participation in governance, employability, and entrepreneurship skills. Key findings indicate legislative and institutional gaps, as well as underutilised opportunities, to strengthen student self-government in Armenia, identifying areas for reform and offering practical recommendations on how to develop effective ECAs. This research also contributes to theoretical and practical discourses in emphasising the transformative potential of ECAs as a means of leadership and employability advancement in contexts without a robust institutional base. By assimilating EU best practices, Armenian universities can foster more equitable and effective student self-governance models that contribute to leadership development and economic outcomes. This study offers actionable insights for policymakers and university administrators, highlighting how strategic governance reforms and proactive student engagement management can maximise the transformative potential of ECAs for human capital development and career readiness in transitional economies.

Key words

extracurricular activities, student self-government, civic responsibility, leadership, employability and entrepreneurial skills, educational management in transition economies, human capital.

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Introduction

Extracurricular activities create an environment for students to develop both academically and personally. By participating in ECAs, students foster essential competencies such as leadership, critical thinking, time management, and decision-making skills that are fundamental to advancing their careers and employability. These activities encompass a wide range of opportunities, including student government, sports clubs, volunteer initiatives, and professional associations. Abelha et al. (2022) emphasise the necessity for higher education institutions (HEIs) to align their curricula with labour market demands by cultivating skills that enhance employability. However, the role of ECAs, and student government in particular, in enhancing employability and leadership remains controversial. While some studies underscore their positive impact on career readiness, others argue that the benefits are unevenly distributed depending on the institutional support and participation (Christison, 2020; Klemenčič, 2011b). This raises the question of how student government is supported and implemented, especially in resource-constrained settings such as Armenia. In Armenia, the development of ECAs has been weak and they have not been well utilised, with limited impact on leadership and employability, in part due to a lack of well-defined frameworks and adequate institutional support. This paper seeks to address these systemic gaps by proposing actionable solutions.

Beyond fostering personal and professional competencies, ECAs hold significant economic potential by enhancing students' employability and entrepreneurial readiness. This is particularly vital in Armenia, where economic challenges and the pressing need to prepare students for a competitive labour market demand urgent action.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) has consistently highlighted the importance of this alignment. In its 2019 report (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2019), the ETF identified key challenges in transforming qualifications to address Armenia's economic needs and emphasized the role of evidence-based policymaking to reduce youth unemployment through enhanced vocational training opportunities. Building on these insights, the 2023 report provided updated recommendations on education and employment policies, particularly focusing on vocational training and skills development to meet labour market requirements (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023). These strategies closely align with the growing emphasis on ECAs as a means of equipping students with transferable skills and improving their readiness for the labour market. Strengthening ECAs is, therefore, not only an educational imperative but also an economic strategy to increase human capital and promote sustainable development. Despite the potential benefits, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies examining the combined impact of decision-making, education for sustainable development, and ECAs (Garrecht et al., 2018).

Given the importance of student self-government for professional development, career advancement and civic engagement, this study seeks to bridge the gap between the theoretical framework and practical implementation related to ECAs within higher education institutions in Armenia. The primary objective of this study is to examine current forms and models of organizing ECAs, with a special focus on student self-government, while examining international experiences. Through comparative analysis, the study aims to propose practical recommendations to improve the effectiveness of student self-government in Armenia, leveraging successful EU practices. The study provides a foundation for solutions that address local needs, with solutions tailored to the challenges of limited student participation and inconsistent legislative support.

The following research questions are posed within the framework of the research:

1. Which legislative gaps have a negative impact on student ECAs in Armenia?
2. How does participation in ECAs contribute to the development of economic and civic competencies, and what specific skills are gained through this involvement?
3. Which international experiences concerning student ECAs, particularly in student self-government, can be effectively localized in Armenia?

4. How can the strengths and opportunities relate to student self-government be leveraged to mitigate its weaknesses (sectoral gaps) and address existing challenges in Armenian higher education?

By addressing these research questions, this study not only advances the theoretical understanding of student self-government but also offers actionable insights for policymakers and university administrators. Its originality lies in the integration of both Armenian and international perspectives on ECAs, thereby contributing to broader theoretical discussions regarding the role of student self-government in leadership development and employability. From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study provide policy recommendations for educational management in transition economies on how to effectively adapt successful European models. These adaptations aim to bridge existing gaps in institutional support, legislative frameworks, and student participation. The contributions of this research hold significance for both scholars engaged in the study of educational governance and practitioners seeking to enhance student engagement and outcomes within higher education.

From management perspective, student self-governance is not merely an academic idea, but it is also an asset in strategy for university administrators. Effective engagement of students in mechanisms of self-governance generates leadership, decision-making and entrepreneurial competencies, which are all core elements of human capital. All these competencies are highly desirable in labour markets that are adaptive and directly affect the institution's ability to innovate and transform. Furthermore, infusing best practices in student self-governance provides an example for university administrators who seek to implement more participative, responsive and open styles of governance. This study, therefore, not only serves to fill educationally pertinent gaps but also offers managerial recommendations for optimizing student participation and institutional performance.

The study is structured as follows: The theoretical part reviews international models of student self-government, their organizational principles, and mechanisms of their financing. The empirical section presents focus group research carried out with students of Armenian universities for gathering information on their estimates as to the present state of ECAs and possible ways of its improvement. A comparative analysis of the Armenian model with international experience allows recommending ways of improvement of student self-government in Armenia. This structure allows a systematic exploration of the research problem and results in development of actionable insights for improving ECAs in Armenian higher education institutions.

1. Literature Review

The concept of extracurricular activities in higher education has evolved significantly over the years. Initially introduced in the United States during the 19th century, ECAs began as supplementary components to the core curriculum, including literary and debating clubs at institutions like Harvard and Yale. Over time, extracurricular activities expanded beyond literary and debating societies to include sports and other activities, reflecting the growing recognition of the importance of a holistic student experience. Hevel (2016) emphasizes that the development of student affairs and the inclusion of these activities were pivotal in fostering well-rounded personal and academic growth, marking a significant shift in the priorities of higher education institutions. One of the primary goals of ECAs has been to foster the development of versatile individuals equipped with essential skills for the labour market. Studies demonstrate that participation in ECAs positively impacts students' academic performance, self-efficacy, and personal development (Aymoldanovna et al., 2015; Eizaguirre, 2019; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Nassar et al., 2024; Wu & Fernando, 2023). Contemporary research highlights the role of ECAs in nurturing essential skills, such as leadership, communication, and decision-making, which are directly transferable to professional and entrepreneurial settings (Ginosyan et al., 2020; Kondur et al., 2021; Lavrentieva & Sugak, 2024; Pukkinen et al., 2023). In their study, Dickinson et al. (2021) explore the challenges and strategies associated with encouraging student engagement in ECAs. They highlight that while ECAs are recognized for their potential to enhance student development and well-being, students often perceive participation as an additional burden rather than a valuable opportunity. The authors emphasize the need for institutions to actively

promote the benefits of ECAs and integrate them into the broader educational experience to foster greater involvement among students. By engaging in ECAs, students can also develop valuable competencies and sustainability-oriented mindsets, equipping them to address complex global challenges and contribute meaningfully to society (Diaz-Iso et al., 2019).

The early concept of ECA has significantly evolved, and most researchers now approach the issue from a broadened and multifaceted perspective. One perspective highlights that students' self-government activities, as a form of ECA, make a critical contribution to their entrepreneurial and employability outcomes. Hui et al. (2021) emphasize that while ECAs can significantly enhance employability skills, their effectiveness often relies on structured institutional support and the level of student participation. Through self-government, students are able to exercise leadership, decision-making and negotiation skills which are also highly relevant and transferable in entrepreneurial ventures and employment (Alimbekova et al., 2018; Patrick, 2022). Indeed, the potency of the ECAs in fostering entrepreneurial skills has been put into evidence by recent studies suggesting that participation in extracurricular programs in entrepreneurship may eventually raise the level of entrepreneurial intentions and career prospects among students (Isac et al., 2023). Hammoda (2023) presents a comprehensive typology of ECAs, emphasizing their alignment with cognitive, experiential, and social learning theories to effectively cultivate entrepreneurial competencies. Mukesh et al. (2024) further emphasize that ECAs focused on social entrepreneurship not only enhance students' practical skills but also create economic value, thereby reinforcing the importance of integrating such activities into higher education curricula.

Another significant gap in the existing research is the lack of a clear and universal definition of 'extracurricular activities'. Literature reviews often highlight the need for a universal approach or clear definition of this term, which can complicate research in this area (Bartkus et al., 2012). Analysing the wording of the concept ("extra" and "curricular"), it can be noted that ECAs refer to activities carried out by pupils or students that are not included in the main curriculum in any form. In other words, such an activity lies outside the formal educational program on the one hand, but at the same time, it is one of the important parts of the educational process. Indeed, several experts (Birzea et al., 2004; Ming Chia, 2005; Nelson et al., 2002) highlight that extracurricular activities are distinct from the formal curriculum and instead fall within the domain of informal education. This highlights the transformative potential of ECAs in bridging the gap between formal education and real-world skill development. As Sternberg et al. (2025) argue, "to prepare students for real-world critical and creative thinking, schools should make more of their learning resemble extracurricular activities that teach real-world skills that are often absent from curricular learning" (p. 16). This perspective reinforces the view that ECAs do not simply complement formal education but play an essential role in equipping students with the necessary competencies for academic success and career readiness.

One of the most common approaches to interpreting the concept of "extracurricular activity" is to consider it according to the type of activity or participation: professional clubs, student self-government, sports clubs, while defining that students' ECAs are closely related to academic performance and positively impact the latter (Ribeiro et al., 2024; Stuart et al., 2011). The types of ECAs are varied and often influenced by the type and size of the university, but the lack of a uniform definition of ECAs in the literature makes comparative research challenging (Diaz-Iso et al., 2020). However, when considering the experience and history of international and local ECAs at the university level, these types can be divided into wide-ranging groups that are commonly found: student self-government, sports clubs, academic and professional orientation clubs, voluntary and community activities, arts and culture clubs, intercultural clubs, entrepreneurial ECAs, such as business incubators, startup competitions, and entrepreneurship clubs and other types of ECAs. The experiences acquired in the various ECAs, such as self-government activities, not only support students' intellectual and social development but also stimulate further moral growth, civic values, and professional competencies, ultimately fostering long-term political participation and active citizenship (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Lundberg & Abdelzadeh, 2024; Zarrett et al., 2021). ECAs serve

as a significant determinant in the development of productive skills among students and their future career advancement. Research increasingly highlights the critical role of student self-government in shaping career readiness by providing students with hands-on experience in governance, budgeting, and policymaking, which can be directly applied in entrepreneurial contexts. In their analysis, Javed and Srivastava (2024) further emphasize the economic implications of ECAs, arguing that these activities equip students with essential skills and experiences that are highly valued in the job market, ultimately contributing to their future economic success. Entrepreneurial-focused ECAs play a crucial role in developing students' business acumen and risk assessment abilities (Ferreira et al., 2017). Furthermore, self-management enables students to manage projects, hence improving creativity and entrepreneurship skills (Alimbekova et al., 2018; Klemenčič, 2014; Sansone et al., 2021). One of the critical aspects of ECAs is the development of skills that affect employability, as participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to enhance job suitability and perceived employability among graduates (Hui et al., 2021; Peng, 2023; Pinto & He, 2019; Yadav & Yadav, 2024). Recent studies have highlighted the crucial role of professional skills and competencies in assessing the employability of graduates, emphasizing their importance in both workplace environments and higher education contexts (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021; García-Álvarez et al., 2022; Jayasingam et al., 2018; Pabian et al., 2011). This indicates that incorporating entrepreneurial-focused ECAs could increase employability among students, particularly in dynamic labour markets where adaptability and innovation are key (Li et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2021).

In contrast, the Armenian higher education system lacks a well-established framework to fully integrate student self-government into ECAs to foster entrepreneurial and employability outcomes. In Armenia, the development of ECAs can be traced back to the Soviet era, when extracurricular activities were organized as ideological and cultural initiatives (Ivanov, 2022). These activities, while limited in scope, provided a foundation for modern ECAs in the country. For instance, post-Soviet reforms have facilitated the emergence of student-led clubs focused on debates and professional skills development, such as those established at Yerevan State University and the American University of Armenia. Although focus group discussions indicate that students recognize the potential benefits of self-governance, they also highlight the lack of institutional support and resources. Notably, research on this topic within the Armenian context remains scarce, with most studies focusing on EU and U.S. educational systems. This gap underscores the need for localized research to explore the long-term career impacts of participation in student self-government in Armenia. Comparatively, EU countries such as Sweden and Poland demonstrate robust systems where student self-government plays a critical role in setting educational policies, advocating for students' interests, and cultivating civic responsibility (Antonowicz et al., 2014).

Additionally, the localized EU models of student self-government in Armenia might enable a very good opportunity for substantial improvement of the level of students' involvement in the institutional decision-making process (Klemenčič, 2011b). For instance, in countries like Sweden and Poland, student self-government plays a very important role regarding setting educational policy, advocating for students' interests, and developing civic responsibility. Enim et al. (2024) emphasize that students become involved in democratic processes, acquire competencies relevant to decision-making, develop leadership skills, and foster active citizenship by participating in governance structures. It is expected that the introduction of such frameworks within Armenian universities will offer students an opportunity to be more engaged in governance processes of their institutions, thus cultivating civic values and preparing them for active membership in society. This model helps students develop a sense of responsibility and commitment within their communities during and beyond their academic careers.

While numerous studies highlight the potential benefits of ECAs, they often generalize the outcomes without providing concrete, measurable evidence of the skills acquired through self-government activities. Moreover, studies predominantly focused on academic and personal development, with limited exploration of its potential impact on such spheres as employability and

entrepreneurial outcomes. This research seeks to bridge this gap by specifically investigating how student self-government within ECAs contributes to employability and entrepreneurial skills assessing their direct impact on career outcomes. Additionally, the study explores how students' participation in self-government and in the decision-making process in higher education institutions can foster active citizenship and engagement in democratic processes. Furthermore, this study addresses existing gaps in literature by analysing the potential benefits of adapting EU models of self-government to the Armenian context.

2. Methodology

The core stages of the investigation include three main components: desk research, empirical data collection and analysis. These stages are designed to comprehensively explore both international practices and local conditions in Armenia, providing a thorough framework for comparative analysis and adaptation. The educational systems of Sweden and Poland are selected as international models and in-depth studies are carried out on the forms and models of organizing student activities of the latter and some Armenian universities, including the principles of their formation, rights and functions, funding principles and legal bases. The choice of these countries is justified and based on the fact that the student unions of the mentioned countries are involved in the administration of the universities and, in the case of Poland, also plays an essential role in the development of the scientific and educational fields. One of the essential characteristics of student self-government in Poland is the material base and financial-legal independence from the management of the educational institution. According to the Law on Higher Education and Science, these funds are annually allocated from the university budget to the activities of student self-government. In this way, student self-government bodies are the decisive representatives of the entire student community and play an important role in higher education. Student organizations – scientific, artistic, touristic, sports and cultural, among others – that collaborate with similar partners from abroad have become an important factor not only in the development of intercultural infrastructure, the exchange of experiences, and cooperation between European universities but also in the development of democracy in higher education in Poland (Derkach, 2020). This stage also provides valuable insights for localizing best practices in Armenia.

To address the research questions directly, each method is designed to align with specific aspects of the study:

- Legislative gaps related to student ECAs by Armenian and other EU legal documents are identified through desk research. The research also considers international experiences, such as that in Sweden and Poland, in order to generate a comparative framework. This method is particularly useful for answering the first and third research questions.
- Focus group discussions allow understand what students perceive as gaps and what opportunities exist in student self-government, but also what skills they developed through that. This addresses the second and fourth research questions.
- The data from desk research and focus groups was synthesized in a SWOT matrix, which directly was broken down into tables, showing the cross-sectional relationships between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This informs the third and fourth research questions.

Thus, the data collection process consists of two major methods: desk research and qualitative field research. The desk research involves reviewing international literature on the organization and impact of student self-government, focusing on successful practices in EU countries. In parallel, legal documents from Armenian and EU universities are analysed to compare legislative frameworks guiding student participation in governance. The second core stage involves empirical data collection through qualitative methods, specifically focus group discussions as well as their systematization and review using the SWOT analysis method. The combination of these two methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical frameworks and practical experiences across diverse educational systems.

The focus group discussion method provides an opportunity to conduct in-depth examination of the primary forms, approaches, quality and effectiveness, the main problems, and students' perceptions and ideas regarding the organization of ECAs in Armenian universities. A total of three focus groups are conducted, each comprising 7-10 participants, representing a diverse sample of students from state, private and international universities. Focus group discussion is appropriate to choose and use because it underlines the experiences of students involved in self-government bodies and reveals their positions and views. Discussions were organized around predefined themes; this means that data on the experiences of students and their opinions on the possible localization of international practices were collected in a systematic way. The methodology of research also ensured a diverse group respondent, detailed below. In all groups, students from different universities or student/youth organizations have participated. This multilayered formation of the groups enables the comparison of opinions and positions of different groups.

The data was systematically organized within thematic categories that corresponded with the study questions. Focus groups transcripts were recorded in order to identify patterns and recurring themes. Data verification through cross validation was done as findings from focus groups were compared to findings derived from desk research. Additionally, member checks were conducted by presenting participants with summarized findings to ensure the accuracy and completeness of their contributions. This triangulation enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings. As previously outlined, the focus group discussions are conducted within the logical framework of the research methodology. They allow for identifying the primary forms of ECAs, positive dynamics, and existing problems and barriers in higher education institutions in Armenia based on the opinions and associations of the participants. Each session adheres to interview guidelines and follows a structured process to separate objective realities from subjective interpretations, providing a rich dataset for analysis.

Finally, a SWOT analysis is performed based on the information obtained through desk review (literature on international experiences and legal documents) and field research (focus group discussions). SWOT analysis combined with robust research methods and analytical tools has been widely recognized as effective in strategic planning and decision-making, especially in educational and organizational research contexts (Phadermrod et al., 2016). This enables a structured exploration of the internal and external factors a particular domain and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which policies or practices exist (Gürel & Tat, 2017; Helms & Nixon, 2010). This stage allows for identifying key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the current state of ECAs in Armenian universities, and the potential for adopting best practices from Sweden and Poland.

3. Research results

3.1 *Student Self-Government in Higher Education Governance: Legislative Frameworks and Comparative Insights from EHEA States*

The development of student self-government is an important factor in modernizing the education system and preparing future professionals. The systemic approach is one necessary prerequisite for this development. It involves developing, completing, and investing in programmatic, legislative, and tactical approaches and regulations for the sector's development.

Student self-government in universities is a structured system that enables students to actively participate in university governance and decision-making on matters directly affecting them. While Planas et al. (2011) highlight that student participation is essential in governance, they also emphasize that the extent of student involvement in governance depends both on institutional policies and faculty perceptions. Similarly, Lizzio and Wilson (2009) found that student representatives commonly face challenges when they strive to affect decision-making because of uncertainties regarding their roles. This problem shows why universities require structured support systems for student governance. In recent decades, student participation in the discussion and governance of higher

education has gained increasing significance (Bartley et al., 2010). In this context, it is important to highlight that this issue is also emphasized in the Bologna Process, where students are regarded as the primary beneficiaries who should actively participate in shaping their education. The Prague Communiqué (2001) specifically recognizes students as full members of the academic community and underscores the importance of their participation in decision-making processes within universities and other higher education institutions. In 2018, the Paris Communiqué emphasized student participation as a fundamental and essential value of the Bologna Process. Student involvement in university governance can vary in scope and depth, encompassing participation in academic self-administration, engagement in student self-governance structures, and contribution to the quality assurance process. The varying levels of student involvement range from access to information and advisory roles to active dialogue and partnership, with the latter signifying direct participation in university decision-making processes. It is important to recognize that governance and decision-making in higher education occur at multiple levels, from individual academic programs to institutional and even supranational frameworks (Figure 1) (Acharya, 2015; Jungblut, 2011; Klemenčič, 2011a).

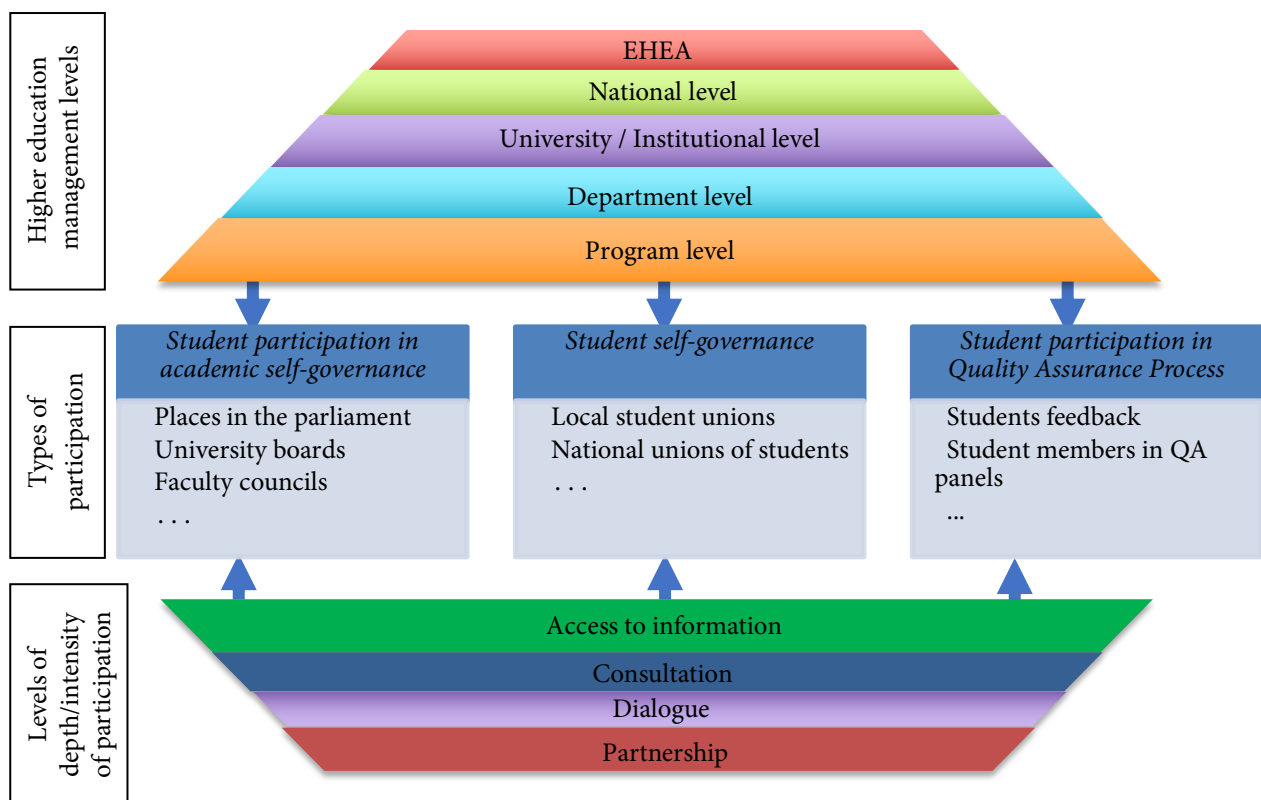


Figure 1. Student participation in the management of the university system.

Source: Developed by the authors based on the works of Jungblut (2011), Klemenčič (2011a) and Acharya (2015).

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an example of supranational governance of higher education, and students can also participate as beneficiaries at this level.

Overall, student participation in higher education governance is crucial at all five levels, as decisions made at any stage ultimately impact students either directly or indirectly. However, the most significant level of involvement is at the university and institutional levels, where decision-making processes have the most immediate and tangible effects on students' academic and social experiences.

The upper levels of the pyramid can also be analyzed through the lens of legal regulations, which determine the extent to which student participation is legally mandated or defined at each hierarchical level. The depth and format of student involvement in university governance vary from the highest

to the lowest levels. For instance, while national legislation may outline general frameworks and minimum standards for student participation in higher education governance, specific implementation and regulations at the institutional level are often determined by individual university charters, leading to variations across institutions. Furthermore, student engagement at the highest levels of one governance structure reinforces and enhances their participation at the highest levels of another. This interdependence between different levels of governance applies across all forms of student participation (Figure 1). Regarding legislation on student participation in higher education governance, it is noteworthy that the London Communiqué (2007) emphasized that many EHEA countries were already implementing legislative initiatives to increase student participation.

The findings from the European Students' Union surveys (2018; 2020) highlight the importance of student participation in governance, with the 2020 report focusing on the legal frameworks across countries and the 2018 report emphasizing the actual involvement of student unions in decision-making. While the 2020 survey quantified the prioritization of the social dimension in 15 countries, the 2018 survey focused on student union engagement in shaping policies related to social needs (European Students' Union, 2020; 2018). Moreover, the 2020 report explicitly noted the underrepresentation of students with disabilities, specifically in the mental health sector, signalling the need for further attention to inclusivity (European Students' Union, 2020).

In all cases, student participation in the governance of higher education should be structured and meaningful. The benchmark in this regard is the provision of such participation across all legislation levels. The depth of involvement should encompass not only decision-making processes but also participation in preparatory work, fostering a more inclusive partnership between students and institutional governance."

The literature review indicates that ECAs, including student self-government, play a crucial role in enhancing students' employability and entrepreneurial opportunities, with notable differences between practices in Armenia and the EU. While there are challenges in effectively implementing ECAs, especially in resource-limited contexts like Armenia, the potential benefits make them an essential component of higher education. Future research should focus on developing and testing specific models for integrating ECAs and student self-government into Armenian higher education, drawing on successful EU practices. Practical interventions should aim at adapting these models to the local context to improve both employability and entrepreneurial outcomes and foster a stronger culture of student self-governance.

3.2 Forms of organization of student ECAs in Armenia

At the legislative level, certain elements of extracurricular activities can be found in Laws on Education (Republic of Armenia, 1999) and Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education (Republic of Armenia, 2004). Specifically, Article 17 of the latter enshrines the right of students to participate in the activities of the relevant governing bodies of HEI and to unite in various student organizations. Meanwhile, the Law on Education (Republic of Armenia, 1999) enshrines student representation in university governance, specifying that at least 25 percent of the members of a higher education institution's governing body must be students. The draft Higher Education and Science Act does not include any regulations regarding the funding of extracurricular activities. However, this does not mean that these cannot be funded by the university administration in the same way that various student initiatives are funded. The procedure for allocating funds is determined by the respective statutes or regulations of the respective university, and the amount of the annual funding is determined by the budget draft of the respective year. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no legal mandate requiring the funding of student self-government activities, leaving the extent and allocation of financial support to the discretion and goodwill of individual universities. The draft does not fill this gap; moreover, there is no phrase "extracurricular activity" here. Basically, as of now, the rest of the regulations are defined by the respective regulations of each university. Within the framework of the research, the types of extracurricular activities were studied in the framework of selected 16 Armenian universities operating based on state, private and international agreements,

namely Yerevan State University (YSU), Yerevan State Medical University (YSMU), International Scientific and Educational Centre of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (ISEC NAS RA), Armenian State University of Economics (ASUE), National Polytechnic University of Armenia (NPUA), Brusov State University (BSU), Armenian National Agrarian University (ANAU), State Academy of Fine Arts of Armenia (SAFA), Yerevan State Conservatory (YSC), Shirak State University (SSU), Vanadzor State University (VSU), Gavar State University (GSU), Eurasia International University (EIU), Gladzor University (GU), American University of Armenia (AUA), French University of Armenia (UFAR).

Through the observation and analysis of various forms and approaches to extracurricular activities within the Armenian university system, the following key points can be noted:

- a) Extracurricular activities play a vital role in students' lives.
- b) A diverse range of extracurricular activities exists and operates across Armenian universities, including voluntary initiatives, self-governance structures, intercultural programs, and sports activities.
- c) The most prevalent form of student self-government across universities is organized through Student Councils (SCs) and Student Scientific Societies (SSSs).

The above-mentioned two subsections address the first research question by examining the legislative frameworks in Armenia and comparing them to those within the European Higher Education Area. The findings also reveal significant gaps in Armenian legislation, particularly regarding the institutionalized financial support for ECAs, which limits their effectiveness. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the need for well-defined standards to ensure both non-formal and meaningful student participation in governance. In addition, they help address the second research question by highlighting the importance of these activities for developing economic and civic competencies.

3.3 The Role of ECAs in Shaping Student Development: Lessons from Sweden and Poland

The differences in structure and traditions among various national education systems make generalizing across countries challenging. In Sweden and Poland, ECAs are significant in shaping student development, though the activities and their focus vary according to educational policies and cultural contexts.

Sweden is notable for its strong focus on both teaching and research, as well as its commitment to student welfare. Unlike many other countries, Swedish higher education is structured around professional programs. These programs, which may span multiple academic disciplines, are designed not primarily to award degrees but to equip students with the qualifications necessary for specific trades or professions (Trow, 2007). Sweden promotes a balanced approach to ECAs, where academic achievement is paired with social and emotional growth. Activities are designed to foster not only individual skills but also democratic values, teamwork, and equality. HEIs actively support student self-government, allowing students to participate in decision-making processes, which develops leadership skills and civic engagement. Luescher-Mamashela (2012) discusses how student representation in university governance plays a critical role in shaping democratic engagement and leadership, offering a valuable perspective on the Swedish context.

The student self-government bodies in Sweden are organized through student unions and nations. The student union of one of Sweden's most prestigious universities, Lund, which brings together around 45,000 students, was seen as the one of the most prominent examples (Lund University, 2013). In the Swedish educational system, the next unique classification in student self-government bodies, rarely found among European educational institutions, is the presence of 13 student "Nations," a unique classification of self-governing student organization. This model is exclusive to Uppsala University and Lund University. Student nations, which are largely voluntary, provide an opportunity for students to engage in various activities and connect with Swedes and Swedish culture (Gnewski, 2020). As part of ECAs, student-centred public organizations and associations, such as the Swedish National Union of Students and the Swedish representation of the Erasmus

Student Network, have been considered. Over the decades, these organizations have successfully united local and international students across Sweden's 15 most prominent and active universities. Moreover, Quilitz (2021) emphasizes that engaging students as stakeholders in sustainability initiatives at universities is crucial for fostering a culture of sustainability. This collaboration not only enhances students' understanding of sustainability issues but also empowers them to contribute actively to their institutions' environmental goals. By involving students in decision-making processes related to sustainability practices, HEIs can create a more inclusive approach that reflects diverse perspectives and encourages a sense of ownership among students.

In contrast to Sweden's broader emphasis on social and civic engagement, ECAs in Poland are often geared toward preparing students for the labour market. There is a strong emphasis on leadership, organizational and communication skills, which align with the country's educational objectives of fostering responsibility and independence. Voluntary and student organizations or associations are the cornerstone for social capital for Polish students (Markowska-Przybyła & Ramsey, 2016). Poland's approach focuses on developing students' readiness for labour market participation, with ECAs often linked to acquisition of job-related competencies. Nevertheless, one of the significant indicators of the positive changes that have taken place in Poland in recent decades is the development of student self-government bodies in universities (Antonowicz et al., 2014, 2024). The Law on Higher Education and Science (Republic of Armenia, 1999), adopted in 2018, provides the legal framework for regulating student councils. One of the essential features of student self-government in Poland is the material basis and financial and legal independence from the management of the educational institution. In Poland, the student voice is represented by the Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland (PSRP), which is made up of representatives of student self-government bodies of universities, operates based on the provisions of the Law on Higher Education and Science and the statute of the PSRP and has the status of a legal entity. The PSRP is the voice of students across Poland and works together with the country's university student organizations to create favourable legislation for students. Council representatives participate on an equal footing in negotiations at the national level and are represented in a number of state bodies and structures. The student self-government is the only representative of the student environment of the educational institution that distributes funds for university-determined student activities. Derkach (2020) examines the Polish system, highlighting how student self-government fosters university autonomy by integrating student perspectives into decision-making processes. These findings align with broader research demonstrating that student self-governance plays a pivotal role in enhancing leadership, governance, and civic engagement in higher education (Hulko & Yaroshenko, 2023; Khusainova et al., 2016). Insights from these two countries could serve as valuable guides for developing frameworks that enhance the effectiveness of ECAs, addressing both the social needs of students and their career readiness. Integrating these approaches can lead to a more comprehensive student development model, where ECAs simultaneously foster civic responsibility, social integration, and employability all at once. A comparative analysis reveals that while EU countries generally have well-established systems for ECAs, including strong frameworks for student self-government, Armenia is still in the development phase. In the EU, student self-government is a key mechanism for cultivating civic engagement and leadership skills, supported by a structured and well-funded institutional framework. By contrast, Armenia faces persistent challenges related to limited resources and a lack of institutional support.

However, Armenia has the potential to adapt successful EU models to its context, particularly in enhancing entrepreneurial and employability outcomes through ECAs and strengthening the role of student self-government as a mechanism for cultivating civic values and active citizenship.

The findings of this discussion and results provide a concrete answer to the third research question with examples of successful models that Armenia can adapt to its context. Thus, actionable insights regarding student governance in Armenia stem for example from Sweden's emphasis on civic engagement, Poland's focus on the financial and legal independence of student self-government. By

integrating these best practices, Armenian higher education institutions can develop more effective strategies for supporting student leadership and engagement.

3.4 Analysis of focus group discussions conducted among students

For the most in-depth study of Armenian experiences with the manifestation of extracurricular activities, field research was conducted. Hence, focus group discussions were organized with 27 participants from the primary beneficiaries – 11 universities and 6 student organizations.

The discussion on the concept of extracurricular activities revealed its multidimensional nature, with students perceiving it in varied ways. Based on the participants' opinions, the three focus groups were created, showing a schematic picture of their occurrences of comments on extracurricular activities (Figure 2).

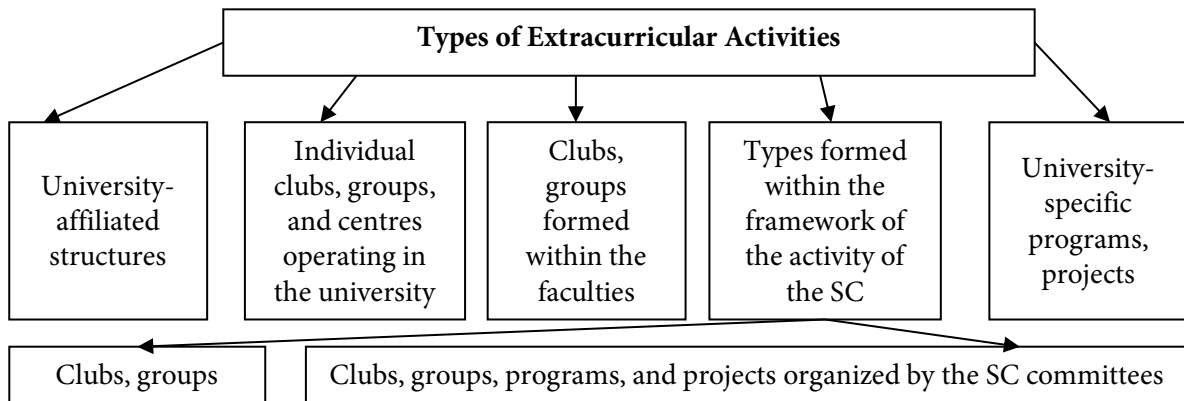


Figure 2. Types of extracurricular activities according to the opinions of the focus group discussions.

Source: Developed by the authors.

A synthesis of university representatives on the types and activities of extracurricular activities further allowed for the identification of several approaches to their classification, as differentiated by the participants (Figure 3).

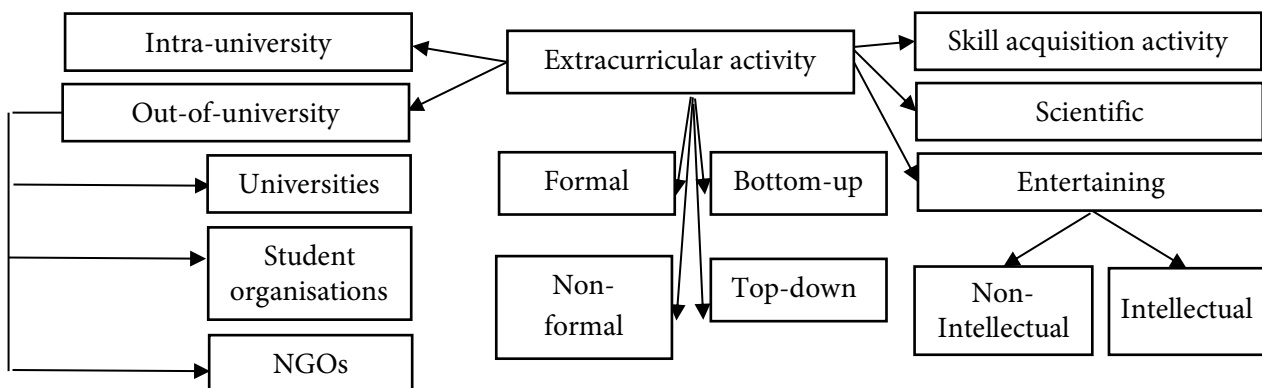


Figure 3. Extracurricular activities according to the preliminary ideas of the discussion participants.

Source: Developed by the authors.

When discussing the problems associated with student self-governance activities, the participants mentioned several key challenges, including the online or hybrid learning, political influences in the past (especially in the case of state universities), lack of transparency and feedback, time allocation, meaningful involvement, scientific orientation, as well as problems with low motivation, indifference, experience sharing, selection of personnel or members, funding conditions and circumstances.

At the same time, several positive developments have been recorded in recent years, including the depoliticization of universities, the emergence of more self-governed, self-aware and informed

students, the introduction of online platforms that provided unique flexibility for work meetings, and improvements in exams, grading, and appeals processes facilitated by the student council, among other advancements.

The participants put forward several proposals to enhance the effectiveness of student self-government, including the implementation of transparent and fair elections for student self-government bodies, improved supervision of the quality of self-governance activities, a clearer division of responsibilities, and the removal of inactive members. They also emphasized the need for organizing inter-university debates on student self-governance. Additionally, they advocated for a more student-centred approach by both the state and universities, the adoption of more flexible management practices, the strengthening of connections between education and the labour market, the development of incentive mechanisms, and the integration of student self-government bodies into the legal framework, among other recommendations.

The issue of student participation in university management was also discussed. In general, the discussion participants had different views on whether the 25 percent student representation in the governing bodies of the universities is adequate. When asked about the forms of participation in the management of the higher education system, the majority stated that all three types of participation (participation in the management of teaching, quality assurance and student self-government) were present. Perhaps the "depth/ intensity of participation" was the issue in which the opinions expressed were diverse, both at the level of individual universities and among representatives of the same university. The relative majority of participants believe that dialogue is the format in which students relate to university management processes. Referring to the levels of participation in the management of the university, the participants of the discussion mainly mentioned the department and institutional levels (Figure 1).

By explicitly addressing the second research question, these findings identify the particular skills students develop as a result of participating in ECAs, including teamwork, leadership and organizational capabilities. In addition, they provide an answer to the fourth research question by suggesting where reform can be done and strategies to deal with these weaknesses.

3.5 SWOT-analysis

Within the framework of this research, the application of the SWOT analysis method allows not only a separate consideration of the field of extracurricular activities and the identification of its weaknesses and strengths, threats and opportunities, but also a comparative analysis with the extracurricular activity models of Sweden and Poland trying to locate their experiences and propose solutions based on this. Such an integrated approach provided a versatile analysis of the studied phenomenon (Table 1).

Table 1. SWOT analysis of international experience (Sweden, Poland).

<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Opportunities</u>
• In Sweden, the Law (<i>Swedish Higher Education Act</i>) clearly defines the procedures for obtaining and operating student self-government status. Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland (PSRP) also operates based on the Law on <i>Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Poland</i>. • There is a collective body of student self-governance, PSRP, a legal entity that works with the Ombudsman. Representatives of PSRP, serving on advisory bodies such as the Board of Main Science and Higher Education, the Polish Accreditation Committee, the Committees of Sejm and Senat, and various working groups within the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, ensure that students' voices are considered in social discussions.	• Student organizations can receive financial support from the university by submitting a grant program (Poland). • Student self-governing bodies have financial and legal independence from the management of the educational institution because the Law stipulates the mandatory provision of material funds to self-governing bodies (Poland). • PSRP has representation in various state bodies (Poland).

• A variety of types of extracurricular activities in the field of self-government, which also differ in their functions, including solving social issues of students (Nations, student unions, associations and political parties - Sweden). • A high level of accountability, defined by clear legal procedures. • Personnel rotation: existence of legally defined procedures for the duration of mandates. • Extracurricular activities aimed at preserving traditional cultural values.	• High motivation of students to participate in extracurricular activities. • The existence of clear procedures for document circulation of extracurricular activities contributes to increasing the effectiveness of the organization of quality assurance processes.
<u>Weaknesses</u> • In the university's collegial body, students' participation in the senate is at least 20 percent (Poland).	<u>Threats</u> • Online classes that hinder active extracurricular activities. • The pandemic caused the reduction of financial resources.

Source: Developed by the authors.

Summarizing the main provisions and conclusions presented in the SWOT analysis, it can be observed that the drafting of the Law on Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia, along with the discussions surrounding it, represents one of the most significant opportunities for making positive changes in the field (Table 2, Table 3).

At the same time, it is noteworthy that Article 27 of the aforementioned draft, which restricts student participation in university administration processes, raises concerns when compared to the provisions of the current Law. The draft aims to clarify and further develop the processes and procedures related to extracurricular activities and contribute to the regulation of the area. As these results directly refer to the fourth research question, they evaluate how strengths and opportunities can be turned to counter weaknesses and threats in the current system. Further, it suggests practical lessons for aligning Armenian ECAs with Sweden and Poland's best practices addressing the third research question. The results highlight that enhancing student self-government and ECAs can also serve as a lever for better institutional management. Having well-structured self-governmental arrangements enables HEIs to devolve responsibility, innovate, and cultivate a new generation of student leaders with entrepreneurial mindsets. The arrangements also close the gap between management and students, enabling feedback mechanisms that are necessary for responsive and nimble management. The comparative study demonstrates that in Sweden and Poland, these kinds of structures are part of good governance, providing useful insights for higher education governance in transition economies to reform their management styles and enhance the involvement of students in decision-making.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the potential of extracurricular activities, namely student self-government, in HEIs of the Republic of Armenia (RA) in comparison with the models in Sweden and Poland. The findings of the study testify that student self-government could be of huge significance while shaping students' employability, entrepreneurial outcomes, and civic engagement. The results are presented in relation to previous research, with a discussion of their implications and suggestions for further investigation.

The findings are in line with the literature that cites ECAs as a necessary factor in developing leadership and entrepreneurial competencies, with a student government in the frontline. Other studies, such as those by Sansone et al. (2021) and Isac et al. (2023), also recorded how ECAs nurture entrepreneurial skills through participation in decision-making processes and management of projects. Meanwhile, the results confirm the conclusions of earlier studies: student self-government activities give practical experience in leadership, governance, and budgeting transferable to professional contexts (Alimbekova et al., 2018).

Table 2. SWOT analysis for the Armenian case.

<u>Strengths</u> • The Law on <i>Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education of RA</i> (Article 17, Clause 4) defines the right of students to participate in the work of university management bodies (Republic of Armenia, 1999). • The Law also stipulates the right of students to unite in student councils, student scientific societies and other student organizations (Article 17, Clause 7). • The Law on <i>Education of RA</i> (Article 28, Clause 10) stipulates that "at least 25 percent of the members of the governing bodies of the higher educational institution are students" (Republic of Armenia, 1999). • The existence of a variety of youth and student organizations and their active functioning, both at the local and international levels. • Variety of types of extracurricular activities available in universities of RA: – structures operating adjacent to the university, – individual clubs, groups, centers operating at the university, – clubs, groups formed within the departments, – types formed within the scope of the activities of the SC, – types formed by individual programs and projects of the university. • Student participation in the management of the university system is generally implemented in 3 main formats (participation in academic management, quality assurance and student self-government). • According to the depth/intensity of participation, dialogue is the main format in which students relate to university management processes.	<u>Opportunities</u> • The legislative framework of the sector is under discussion and reforms. • Student self-government bodies have the right to use alternative financial sources that are not prohibited by Law (sub-grants, entrepreneurial activities, grants outside the university). • Opportunities for students to voice their problems in university management bodies. • The Armenian National Student Association (ANSA), which previously united many student and youth associations, may have a great potential and mission.
<u>Weaknesses</u> • The term 'extracurricular activity' is neither used nor defined in the Law and the draft of the Law, which hinders the establishment of the scope and clarity of the field. • In the case of non-state universities, the control over the 25 percent representation of students in the governing bodies of the university defined by the Law on Education of RA (Article 28, Clause 10) remains weak (Republic of Armenia, 1999). • There is no ombudsman institute dedicated to addressing student issues. • Extracurricular activities, in particular, work in a self-governing body, are not considered as work experience or other advantages. • Lack of personnel rotation; lack of legally defined procedures for the duration of mandates. • Limited opportunities for regional extracurricular activities (including self-government bodies). • Partnership, as the highest level of student participation (intensity/depth) in university management processes, is not yet functioning as well. • Supranational and national levels as the highest levels of participation in university management do not yet exist; mainly, participation takes place at the department and institutional levels.. • Lack of initiative among students to raise funds.	<u>Threats</u> • The politicization of university self-governance/management bodies. • Online courses that hinder the full development of self-management activities. • Lack of confidence in student self-government bodies, both by students and professors. • Financial and legal dependence of self-governing bodies on the university. • Weak control of budget expenditures, lack of transparency and accountability. • Lack of legal provisions to recognize volunteering as an extracurricular activity • The draft Law on Higher Education and Science (Republic of Armenia, n.d., Article 26) limits students' participation in university management processes to at least 25 percent. • The draft Law on Higher Education and Science (Republic of Armenia, n.d., Article 20, Clause 13) prohibits engaging any funding for the activities of student bodies other than those provided by the university. • Lack of information about other types of extracurricular activities. • Lack of motivation and engagement among students. • As a result of the inactivity of SSSs, the SCs often take over the functions of the former

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 3. Matrix of cross-sectional SWOT analysis for the Armenian case.

<u>Strengths – Threats</u> • Activating the ANSA or creating a similar self-governing collective body to define its political direction and representation in various state bodies (in the example of the Student Parliament of the Republic of Poland) will promote students' participation in decision-making and prevent the dangers of student councils being politicized. • Revise article 26 of the draft Law on Higher Education and Science, which limits the mandatory participation of students in university management processes as defined by the current Law. If the current Law stipulates that students have “at least” 25 percent representation in the governing bodies of the university, then this provision (minimal threshold) is absent in the draft law; that is, it will be regulated by the internal charter of the university and at the discretion of the university, the governing board may also not include students. The draft (Article 27, Clause 6) only specifies that students make up to 10 percent of the total number of academic council members. • According to the draft, volunteering will be recognized as a type of extracurricular activity, and the credits set for it will contribute to the activation of student volunteering activities. • Design formats in which appropriate control will be established by the charter of universities, transparency and accountability of self-governing bodies will be ensured, which in turn will also contribute to the growth of trust in student self-governing bodies. • Using the activities of youth and student organizations in the local and international spheres to increase the level of information about extracurricular activities and their types, both within the university and beyond, will also contribute to the growth of motivation and involvement. • The university charter clearly defines and separates the functions of the SSSs and SCs, while also creating opportunities for network cooperation between universities, which will help increase their activity. • Financial and legal independence of self-governing bodies from the management of the educational institution should be ensured by establishing the mandatory provision of material funds, as shown in Poland.	<u>Weaknesses – Opportunities</u> • According to the draft on <i>Higher Education and Science</i>; – put the term "extracurricular activity" into circulation, – to formulate provisions and minimum imperative norms regarding the financing of extracurricular activities, – establish control over the maintenance of at least a 25 percent ratio of students to the number of members in the governing bodies of the university, particularly in relation to non-state universities, – to develop formats in which the work in the student self-government bodies will be considered as work experience according to the charter of the universities, – establish formats by which the rotation of personnel will be ensured in self-governing bodies according to the charter of universities (according to the example of Sweden). • Initiate the creation of an ombudsman institution dealing with student issues by activating the ANSA or creating a similar organization, following the example of the Student Parliament of the Republic of Poland. • By activating the ANSA or creating a similar self-governing collective body, increase the activity of regional extracurricular student associations, create network cooperation. • With the activation of the ANSA or the creation of a similar self-governing collective body, students' participation in university governance processes should be brought to partnership on national and supranational levels. • Organize special courses for local self-government bodies to use alternative financial sources (sub-grants, entrepreneurial activities, grants outside the university).
<u>Strengths – Opportunities</u> • According to the draft Law on <i>Higher Education and Science</i>; – to strengthen the right of students to participate in the work of university management bodies, to unite in student councils, student scientific societies and other student organizations, – leave unchanged the ratio of students to at least 25 percent of the number of members in the governing bodies of the university, establishing new control mechanisms for its implementation – establish a credit system for active participation in extracurricular units, increasing the involvement of students in various extracurricular associations. – establish new mechanisms for increasing the levels and intensity of student participation • To increase the activities of students at the local and international levels by activating the ANSA or creating a similar self-governing collective body.	<u>Weaknesses – Threats</u> • The lack of personnel rotation in student self-government bodies leads to the formation of an atmosphere of mistrust, reducing motivation and involvement. • Gaps in the current Law have a negative impact on the organization of extracurricular activities, activation processes and efficiency. • The draft Law prohibits external funding that may cause limitations for student bodies, overlooking the reality in Armenia, where many student initiatives are supported by Erasmus+, DAAD, Fulbright, TEMPUS, and other international educational programs, and hindering the development of student entrepreneurship and social programs. • There is a substantial disparity between regional and urban extracurricular activities in terms of activity and involvement. • In non-state universities, the control is weaker in terms of ensuring students' participation in university management processes and compliance with the provisions of the Law.

Source: Developed by the authors.

This research, however, covers a gap in the literature that has not been well addressed by earlier works, especially in Armenian society, where self-government is still in its developing phase compared to EU models. Although a number of studies have focused on EU countries (Klemenčič, 2011b), institutional support and resources are so lacking in the Armenian HEIs that previous experiences in the aforementioned countries cannot be taken as wholly applicable here. It remains a finding of great salience, which has not basically been discussed in previous investigations, that successful EU models need adaptation to the educational landscape of Armenia.

Adapting EU models of student self-government to Armenia could have significant positive impacts, not only on employability and entrepreneurial skills, but also on fostering civic responsibility and student engagement in decision-making processes. This finding aligns with studies like those by Klemenčič (2011b), which emphasize the role of student self-government in fostering civic engagement and active citizenship. The Armenian context, however, adds an extra layer of complexity due to the lack of established frameworks and institutional support for student-led initiatives, as revealed in focus group discussions.

The most important unexpected outcome of this research is how much Armenian students consider self-government as a means to develop career-oriented skills, but at the same time be able to contribute much to the field of civic engagement and democratic values. Many previous studies tend to concentrate on employability issues only (García-Álvarez et al., 2022; Jayasingam et al., 2018), while this paper outlines the double role of students' self-government in professional and civic spheres. This double role may have larger implications for the roll-out of ECAs in Armenia by suggesting that attention needs to shift away from employability toward civic and democratic participation.

The findings of this study have important managerial implications for university leaders and higher education administrators. As far as they demonstrate that robust student self-governance and properly organised ECAs develop entrepreneurial and leadership competencies and institutionalise efficiency, the findings perfectly fit into general educational management strategies. In particular, establishing formal student engagement channels, implementing a shared governance tradition, and enhancing the integration of ECAs in university practices can be forces driving organizational innovation, responsiveness, and deeper stakeholder involvement. These are consistent with international trends in higher education management, where student-emancipating institutions that engage students as equal partners in governance become more adaptable and thriving in chaotic settings. Thus, the managerial lessons of this study's findings extend far beyond the Armenian context and offer relevant lessons for educational managers in other transition economies and globally.

The present study gives valuable insight, but the following aspects require further investigation. First, future studies could conduct longitudinal research following students involved in student self-government or other forms of ECA and their eventual careers over periods of time for clearer insights into what really happens in the long term after involvement in ECA. This would give a quantified insight into the impact of student self-government on employability and entrepreneurship.

The question, then, is how different kinds of ECAs like cultural clubs or sport teams relate to student self-government in enhancing employability and leadership skills. Indeed, it would provide a fine-grained understanding of the various ECAs and respective contributions to career outcomes and development of entrepreneurship skills and employability.

Third, it would be useful to investigate the cultural and institutional factors that facilitate or hinder the effective localization of the EU models of student self-government in Armenia. This would examine how Armenian universities and policy makers might work towards EU frameworks in a manner that best fits local cultural and educational conditions.

Finally, a look into the role of digital platforms and online ECAs in facilitating leadership skills, but also focused on the post-pandemic context, is called for in future research since online environments provide unique opportunities for student engagement and leadership development that may differ from more traditional in-person activities.

Conclusions

The research on student extracurricular activities, including student self-government, described the current organizational forms, models, gaps, and possible reforms in the Armenian context, drawing on some comparisons with European experiences, especially in Sweden and Poland. Employing qualitative approaches, such as document analysis, focus group discussions and SWOT analysis, the study identified key findings and proposed recommendations for improving the management and effectiveness of student self-government in Armenia.

The research findings revealed that gaps in the legislative frameworks related to student self-government in higher education institutions of Armenia negatively impacted the organization and effectiveness of the ECAs at promoting employability, leadership and entrepreneurial skills. This was attributed to a lack of rotation and transparency within the personnel composition of the student self-government bodies, which undermines the building of trust, motivation, and involvement among students. Despite all these challenges, the study also reaffirmed that student self-government is key and vital in developing leadership, decision-making, and entrepreneurship skills that complement students' career prospects.

The study also pointed out inequalities between urban and regional universities, as well as between state and non-state institutions, with respect to both the level of activity and involvement of student self-government bodies and compliance with the laws on student participation in university governance. Such findings suggest a need for reforms for enabling equal and more effective patterns of student self-government across all Armenian universities.

The findings of this study lead to several important policy implications. First, the need for legislative reforms in reinforcing students' participation in university governance and assuring at least a 25 percent student representation within decision-making bodies is of paramount importance. This will help in enriching students with leadership and civic engagement motives. Furthermore, the policy should introduce compulsory principles for financing student self-government bodies to make them financially and legally independent from university management. A good model, which could be transferred to Armenia, is that of Poland, whereby student self-governments are financially independent and receive resources from university budgets.

This means that setting up formal mechanisms for rotating personnel and implementing principles of accountability within the framework of student self-government bodies would make their activities much more transparent and help to restore students' trust. Moreover, it would enable students to state work in student self-government in their records as work experience, which is an important factor in finding employment afterwards. An ombudsman institution for student affairs, finally, following the example of Armenian National Students' Association (ANSA), would be a further development in the direction of overseeing and maintaining student self-government.

Although this study adds significantly to the insights provided in the literature, it has some limitations which should be considered in future research studies. One of the major limitations of this research is the inability to trace over time (the lack of longitudinal data) the possible long-term influences of participation in student self-government on students' careers. Furthermore, in the Armenian context, there was a gap in the literature related to the issues under study, which did not allow relying on secondary research and Armenian research data.

This study makes important contributions to the broader field of higher education, particularly in understanding the role of student self-government in fostering employability, leadership, and civic engagement. Such a comparison – the Armenian context versus EU models – allows the research to draw on how European best practices could be localized toward the particular needs and challenges that Armenian universities are facing.

These results underpin the structured student self-government as an instrument of professional and civic development. The research results and recommendations given from this study (such as improvement of the legislative frameworks, financial independence and transparency) can ensure

that ECAs contribute more substantially to the preparation of students for successful careers while simultaneously promoting active citizenship and democratic engagement.

The findings of this study highlight the necessity for university management to view student self-government and ECAs as more than ancillary activities, but indeed as strategic drivers of human capital development and institutional development. Universities are recommended to prioritize the incorporation of leadership and entrepreneurial competencies in their extracurricular and governance frameworks, providing the preconditions for active student participation in decision-making and managerial competencies acquisition. Operational steps entail putting into code the representation of students on key governance structures, setting up accountability mechanisms that are transparent, and supporting projects enhancing employability and entrepreneurship. University leaders, through such strategies, are in a position to govern student engagement more effectively and instill institutional change in line with contemporary economic and management science principles.

The study, therefore, concludes that the institution of student self-government indeed has the potential to fill the gap that exists between academic learning and the demands of the labour market. In view of the fact that Armenian higher education institutions are undertaking reforms that provide an enhanced role for students in university governance and access to resources and training, they are in a position to better prepare their graduates to meet the challenges in the labour market and contribute to the creation of a new generation of active and responsible citizens.

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