MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN THE ACTIVITIES OF STUDENT GOVERNMENTS

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Purpose: The article deals with the motivation of students actively involved in the work of student governments to work for these organizations. Understanding these motivations is crucial to effectively support and mobilize members of the local government to take action in line with the goals of the organization and their own aspirations. Empirical investigations also focus on the assessment of whether work in the student government satisfies the three, indicated by Deci and Ryan, basic for the development of the highest form of motivation – intrinsic motivation, the need for relationships, competence and autonomy.

Design/methodology/approach: Qualitative research based on individual interviews was conducted among people who had experience of being active members of student governments.

Findings: The analysis of the obtained empirical material emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation, both in the context of students' decision to join the student government and in the context of continuing work for the benefit of this organization. The results also indicate that activity in the local government creates the opportunity to meet the needs: relationships, competences and autonomy.

Research limitations/implications: The study did not consider contextual variables, such as organizational culture or competencies of people holding managerial positions in local governments, their leadership style, as well as the personality traits of the respondents. All these variables can be important for motivation to work in local governments. To confirm the results obtained, it would be worthwhile to conduct research in a quantitative model.

Practical implications: The research presented in the article can contribute to a more effective design of the work of student governments in a way that is conducive to the development of the highest form of motivation and commitment. In the light of the results obtained, it seems crucial to organize the activities of the local government in such a way that they focus on supporting the development of internal motivation by comprehensively taking care of the satisfaction of three needs important for its development: relationships, competences and autonomy.

Originality/value: The results indicate intrinsic motivation that is important for building engagement in the work of student organizations. However, the implementation of the SDT theory requires organizational support, which, apart from the spontaneous actions of the members of local governments themselves, would create an opportunity to satisfy the needs that are important for the theory in question: the relationship of competence and autonomy.

Keywords: self-determination theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation, student governments, student organizations.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The student government is a place that fosters the comprehensive development of students, enabling them not only to expand their knowledge and skills in the field of education acquired during their studies, but also to build new interpersonal relationships and engage in various non-teaching activities. It is an organization whose members are all students at a given university, but only some of them decide to actively participate in shaping academic life by becoming active members of student governments. They carry out work in various areas, such as support in didactic and social matters or the organization of events integrating the student community. Each person actively working in the student government is guided by individual motivations that affect their involvement in the activities of this organization. Understanding these motivations is crucial to effectively support and mobilize members of the student government to take action in line with the goals of the organization and their own aspirations. It can be assumed that people who are involved in the activities of non-profit organizations, in this case student organizations, show particularly strong intrinsic motivation. The aim of this article will be to assess students' motivations for joining and participating in student government. The analysis will be based on the theory of self-determination created by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000). It is also important to examine whether the experience of being a member of the student government allows for the satisfaction of three basic needs important for the development of internal motivation: belonging, competence and autonomy. In this context, it will be examined to what extent the student government environment supports or inhibits the fulfillment of these needs.

2. Student Governments

The student government is a body established in accordance with the Act of 4 May 1982 on Higher Education. According to statistical data collected by the Central Statistical Office, in the academic year 2023-2024 there were 354 higher education institutions, which equals the number of student governments. The role, competences and tasks have been expanded in successive updates of legal acts. These updates took place on 12.09.1990, 21.07.2005, 20.07.2018 (Grzonka, 2013; Musiałkiewicz, Więźnowski, 2019). According to the latest update of the Act, the local government operates through two bodies: the chairman and the legislative body. The most important task of this institution is to be the sole representative of all students at the university. This means that the student government represents all students at the university to the authorities. Other important tasks of the student government described in the Act include: conducting activities in the field of student affairs belonging to social, living and

cultural activities, distributing funds allocated to student affairs by the university authorities, then preparing a report on the distribution of these funds and their settlement at least once a year, and finally making the report available in the Public Information Bulletin on the university's website. The tasks of the student government body's legislative body include adopting regulations which define the organization and operation of self-government institutions and appointing representatives to the governing bodies of an HEI and, in the case of a public HEI, also to the electoral college (Journal of Law 2018, item 1668).

Through student government activities, students have the opportunity to gain practical knowledge and psychosocial competences, which they are often unable to acquire by participating in major classes alone. The student government teaches how to deal with projects, which can be a valuable experience to help you start your career. In addition, it helps in establishing contacts with other students at a given university, universities from all over the country, as well as foreign universities. The activity of the student government, active members, shows a real impact on meeting the needs of students. It can also be a field of competition or a place to look for one's own self (Grzonka, 2013).

Considering the important role played that student governments, both for universities and for the development of students, it seems important to know the motivation that guides students who undertake additional academic activity. This seems to be important not only from a cognitive perspective, but also considering the possibility of using this knowledge as a guide when designing the structures of student organizations and the processes taking place in them.

3. Motivation of students to engage in the work of student governments in the context of the theory of self-determination

The concept of motivation derives from the Latin verb *movere* (Zimabrdo, Gerrig, 2024, p. 468), which means "to move" in a specific direction. In broad terms, motivation refers to illustrating the mechanisms that are responsible for initiating, directing, maintaining, and terminating behavior. It applies to both simple and complex behaviors, internal and external, affective and cognitive machisms (Łukaszewski, 2006, p. 427). Deci and Ryan (2000), based on many years of research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, present the theory of self-determination theory (SDT). They point out that human behavior is intentional, goal-oriented, and this intentionality depends on internal and external causes, but as they emphasize, this division is not simple but is a continuum showing a multidimensional conceptualization of motivation. When describing the components of SDT, the authors start with amotivation, lack of motivation, which describes a state of lack of regulation. Amotivation results from the fact that the individual does not value a given activity, does not feel competent to perform it or thinks that a given activity will not lead him to the goals he sets for himself. Describing extrinsic

motivation, they indicate that the cause of behavior is pressure or control, distinguishing four types of pressure. The first, external regulation, is characterized by the fact that the individual's behavior depends on an external reward or the desire to avoid punishment. The second, introjective regulation, is characterized by an internal compulsion to take action in order to gain one's own approval and the approval of the environment. In the case of another type of regulation - identification, the individual takes action because they have personal meanings for him, are valuable to him to some extent. The highest autonomous type of extrinsic motivation is the integrated regulation following identification, which is characterized by activities that are personally important due to their valued outcome. Internal regulation is independent of external stimuli, it includes the desire to engage in action for the sake of action. Intrinsic motivation describes actions that are undertaken by a person for their own curiosity, joy, passion, as opposed to instrumental behaviors that characterize extrinsic motivation. According to the authors, it is intrinsic motivation that is the natural tendency of an individual to develop and learn (Deci, Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Deci, 2000a, 2000b). Research indicates that intrinsically motivated students feel more interested in their activities (Deci, 1971).

Motivation, i.e. the ability to direct an action, thus develops on a continuum from external motivation to internal motivation. Researchers emphasize the importance of two types of motivation and point out that an individual experiences true happiness when he engages in activities focused on the fulfillment of internal needs, while all actions taken for external reasons are less conducive to a sense of fulfillment, and thus to the experience of true happiness (Ryan, Deci, 2000b).

At the center of the described SDT are three universal, basic needs: autonomy, competence and relationships with others, which are satisfied as part of the actions taken by the individual. They are the basis for the emergence of internal motivation. The need for relationships (belonging) refers to interaction with other people and is related to the feeling of being part of a community, attachment and experiencing respect, interest and care from other people. The need for competence is related to the desire to feel one's own effectiveness, the sense of having skills in a given area, as well as the belief in the sense of the actions taken. Competence, also referred to as a sense of mastery, is fostered by a well-organized environment that will provide optimal challenges, positive feedback and development opportunities. Autonomy, on the other hand, is related to the individual's sense that he or she is the cause of events. It is a sense of agency, the ability to make choices, to make decisions. It is perceiving one's behavior as coming from within, as consistent with one's own individual desires, beliefs, values and interests. This sense is weakened by external control – both in the form of punishment for negatively evaluated actions taken and rewards for desired behaviors (Góżdź, 2015; Ryan, Deci, 2020a)

The assumption of SDT is the belief that the conditions supporting the individual in experiencing autonomy, competence and relationships are conducive to the highest quality forms of motivation and commitment to action. Creating an environment that meets these needs

also results in increased productivity, perseverance, and creativity in the activities people undertake. SDT also suggests that the lack of support or thwarting any of these three needs – relationships, competences and autonomy – will have a detrimental effect on the well-being of individuals in this environment, and that the management level's focus solely on external remuneration may become demotivating in the long term. Disturbed intrinsic motivation is highly likely to translate into negative prosperity of employees in the organization and, ultimately, reduced effectiveness of their activities. It is also pointed out that deprivation of even one of the three mentioned needs has a negative impact on mental health, as well as a decrease in motivation to take action (Ryan, Deci, 2020a; Center for Self-Determination Theory, 2025).

In higher education, motivation plays an important role in the process of shaping students' commitment and competence development. According to SDT, students' behaviors illustrating their level of academic activity can be arranged on a continuum: from behaviors illustrating the basic scope of activities necessary to obtain a higher education diploma (which are a response to external regulations and expectations of the university) to students' academic activity significantly exceeding these activities, expressed in involvement in many university initiatives, to co-creation of academic reality, influence it through activity in student organizations. Undertaking voluntary volunteer work in the student government, going beyond the duties of a student, has its motivational basis. This motivation seems to have its own specificity and the identification of these needs that can be satisfied by activity in student organizations is extremely important in the process of stimulating student engagement. It is also worth noting that motivating members of student councils or non-profit organizations differs from motivating a typical employee, due to the specificity of work, which is unpaid and voluntary. It is extremely important to maintain a high level of motivation among members and stimulate it among potential members, because voluntary work within student governments is work for the benefit of the entire university.

It can be assumed that people who engage in additional activities in non-profit organizations, in this case student organizations, are characterized by particularly high intrinsic motivation. Previous research among students using the assumptions of the SDT theory has focused mainly on the choice of fields of study (Arden, Tomik, 2014) or motivating students to learn (Grabowski, 2014).

Knowledge about the motivation behind joining and acting in the student government could support universities in the process of designing the organization of the student government. In the case of extrinsic motivation, it would be possible to intensify the external mechanisms of influence (rewards, punishments), and in the case of intrinsic motivation, it would be possible to create an environment of local governments that is conducive to satisfying the three needs indicated in the SDT theory – belonging, competence, autonomy.

4. Methods

In connection with the above, a research question was formulated about the motivation of students joining and acting in student organizations in the context of the theory of self-determination. The aim of the empirical work was an attempt to examine whether, in the perception of students, the experience of being a member of the student government allows for the satisfaction of three needs, which are important and crucial for the development of internal motivation: belonging, competence and autonomy. And to what extent does the student government environment meet or frustrate these basic needs.

In search of answers to the above questions, a survey was conducted among people who had experience of being active members of the student government. The research was carried out in the period 06.-09.2024.

The research was carried out using the method of a diagnostic survey. Individual interviews were conducted using the form of a semi-structured interview. The interview questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first one was used to collect metric data, while the other two were focused on searching for answers to the research questions constructed by the authors. The second group grouped questions that were aimed at examining what motivated respondents to join and act within the framework of self-government. The last section of the questions focused on examining the respondents' perceptions of satisfying the three basic ones mentioned by Deci and Ryan (2020a) as conducive to the highest quality forms of motivation and commitment to action, as well as the needs: autonomy, competence and relationships. The questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Interview questions

Study area	Questions section	Questions
Metrics	S1	• Age • Sex • University • Number of students at the university • Field of study • Student organization • Number of active members of the self-government • One year and one year of studies - joining the student government • Function
Respondents' motivation to join the student government	S2	• Why did you decide to join this student organization? • What were your main expectations before joining the organization? • What are the benefits of being a member of a student organization? • What motivates you the most to continue your activity in the organization? • What changes in the organization could increase your motivation even more?

Cont. table 1.

Survey of respondents' experience of meeting three needs as part of membership in an organization	Section 3: S3_R (need for relationships) S3_K (need for competence) S3_A (need for autonomy)	
	S3_R	• What motivates you the most to continue your activity in the organization? • Does collaborating with other members of the organization affect your motivation? How? • Do you have a sense of community and belonging within the organization? How does this affect your engagement? • Do you have a sense of support from people working in the local government? Do you support others yourself?
	S3_K	• What skills have you gained through membership in the organization? • What are your greatest achievements within the organization?
	S3_A	• Does the organization allow you to implement your own ideas and initiatives? • Do you have the ability to make decisions on your own, the ability to choose tasks, actions taken as part of your work in the local government? How does it affect your motivation?

Source: own study.

The survey involved 10 respondents aged 20 to 30, 5 women and 5 men. The respondents were people who had experience of being active members of the student government. They represented a total of 8 Polish universities: AGH University of Krakow (2 people), Lodz University of Technology (2 people), Lublin University of Technology, Warsaw University of Life Sciences, University of Physical Education in Krakow, Koszalin University of Technology, University of Economics in Katowice and Silesian University of Technology. The respondents studied various fields of study.

Each interview lasted about 1 hour. Questions were asked to everyone according to the order presented in the table, interesting topics were deepened.

A thematic analysis of the respondents' statements was used to analyze the empirical material taken. The analysis was carried out without the use of tools supporting the coding process and consisted in extracting from the respondents' statements descriptions of motivation to join and participate in the work of the local government (S2) and experiences related to satisfying (or not satisfying) three needs during work in the local government: relationships, competences and autonomy (S3), which constituted the categorization key: S3_R the need for relationships – cooperation, community, belonging, receiving support, giving support, S3_K need for competence – development: skills, competences, achievements; S3_A need for autonomy - decision-making, a sense of influence, implementation of one's own ideas/initiatives.

5. Results

The respondents joined and acted in student governments mainly for their own internal reasons. They varied depending on the subject. There were signals that gratification in a sustainable way could additionally build motivation to act. In the light of the results obtained, the student government is a place that allows for the satisfaction of three needs important for achieving internal motivation: affiliation, competence and autonomy. A summary of the results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Summary of the survey results

Questions section	Results	Quotes from interviews
S2	The respondents paid attention primarily to the possibility of development, the desire to meet new people and the need for real influence on the university's activities and the situation of students. In response to the recommended changes in local governments that would have a positive impact on the motivation of its members, there were mentions of external motivation, e.g. gratification of the most active members.	*Joining the student government allowed me to meet many new people and acclimatize/* *If work in the university counted for a scholarship, it would certainly improve my motivation.*
S3_R	All respondents indicated a strong bond with both the organization and the members of the organization. They were often the motivation for them to act. The respondents indicated that they were open to supporting other members, and they also received support from other members, which strongly built their relationships.	*It is here that you are always supported by the majority. There is no such thing that a person who has the desire to do something does not have the support of people who will help them do something with us.*
S3_K	The respondents point to many specialist competences, as well as psychological and social ones, which allowed them to develop their activities in the local government. These are, include, resourcefulness, timeliness, responsibility, public speaking, negotiation, teamwork, organization of events, prioritization of tasks, communication, leadership competences or conflict resolution. The achievements mentioned by the respondents were very wide, from the possibility of organizing events to simplifying the life of students by finding interesting solutions	*... I am sent to various types of events where I can educate myself, I get projects in which I can fulfill myself. Well, it's definitely project management. This is a big plus for me from the local government. Managing the team too, maintaining these relationships in the team. My greatest achievement was the inclusion of my university in the structures of the forum of technical universities and the establishment of Industry Committee of the Forum of Life Sciences Universities.*
S3_A	Respondents had the opportunity to implement their own ideas, not only as part of already existing projects, but also to take their own initiative to create new ones.	*... Such an example is that I have always dreamed of a ball, like engineer's balls at other universities. And I insisted on doing a winter ball at the University of Technology. And I managed to make this ball happen and it was a completely budget-free event.*

Source: own study.

6. Discussion

The analysis of the results of the research, which was conducted among people who had experience of being active members of student governments, shows the importance of intrinsic motivation. The respondents declare that the motives for joining and further involvement in the work of local governments result directly from their interest in this type of activity, which consists of working with other people, the possibility of broadly understood development, as well as creating reality. Sociocentric behaviors of active members of the student government, directed towards the benefit of the community, which is the university, are related to the feeling of internal satisfaction. It is worth noting that despite the dominant answers, which indicated the participation of intrinsic motivation of the surveyed, especially when asked about recommendations regarding possible improvements in the activities of student organizations, they also indicated external stimuli that could be offered to active members of the student government. There were elements such as, for example, the issue of promotion in the structure of the local government, additional points to the scholarship, however, it is worth emphasizing, the respondents did not indicate external motivators as factors that decided that they joined the organization.

In the perception of the respondents, working in the local government is conducive to three needs that are key to building internal motivation. The first, the need for relationships, was indicated as one of the main factors motivating members of the self-government to actively participate in it. The need to belong, to be part of a community, to establish contacts and develop them built motivation to join, but also allowed them to maintain enthusiasm for work, as well as sustained the decision to stay in the organization despite the difficulties that arose. The respondents repeatedly pointed to the importance not only of the fact that they can achieve common goals, but also the fact that they can break it up together with others, they can count on mutual kindness and interest.

In the perception of the respondents, the student government is an excellent space not only to build bonds with others and carry out community activities, but also to develop competences. The respondents emphasized that this aspect was important both in the process of making decisions to join the organization and maintained the motivation to later engage in the work of the local government. The respondents indicated several competences that work in the local government develops, paying particular attention to psychological and social competences. It also turns out that activity in the student government allows you to improve leadership competences and stimulate proactive and entrepreneurial attitudes.

What is important for building intrinsic motivation is the sense of autonomy that seems to be experienced by members of student governments. The respondents indicated an important possibility for them to have an impact on shaping the university's activities. They referred here not only to the possibility of undertaking new initiatives, but also to the possibility of

co-deciding on the shape of cyclical events at the university. What was important for the respondents was not only the autonomy of the student government as a student organization, but also this individual sense of influence – the ability to make choices as to selected tasks tailored to one's own competences, as well as the way they are performed.

In the light of the results obtained, it seems crucial to organize the activities of the student government in such a way that they focus on supporting the development of internal motivation by comprehensively taking care of the satisfaction of three needs important for its development: relationships, competences and autonomy.

7. Summary

The motivation of students to engage in the activities of student organizations is important not only for the functioning of universities, but also for the development of their competences. Engaging in this type of activity is conducive to the development of interpersonal, organizational and leadership skills, which have a measurable impact on their further academic development and professional careers.

In the light of the results of the research, it can be noted that intrinsic motivation is important for building commitment to the work of student organizations. However, the implementation of the SDT theory requires organizational support, which, in addition to the spontaneous actions of the student government members themselves, would create an opportunity to satisfy the relationship of competence and autonomy, which are important for the discussed theory of needs.

The first key element is to create a space for creating bond-forming processes that satisfy the need for affiliation. Although the respondents pointed to integration activities undertaken by the student government, such as workshops, meetings and trainings, at many universities they are not obligatory and rather undertaken as a result of spontaneous, distant activities of the members of the student government. What seems to be important in this context is the implementation of *onboarding* processes for new members, which would also prevent the resignation of new people. In this key moment for building commitment, it is worth supporting local governments, also materially, in building a sense of belonging.

The second task, the implementation of which should be supported by the university, is to ensure the development of competences through participation in the student government. As the results of research indicate, not only substantive competences, but also transferable competences in the area of personal and social competences. In this matter, it is important not only to provide important and necessary training, which universities often offer to all members of student governments, but also to ensure that they are better suited to the needs of students involved in the work of student governments, for example through regular research in this area.

What is important in building the competences of representatives of the academic community is also the development of competences in the peer teaching model, which in this particular environment could also focus on contacts, trips to other universities – Polish and foreign – which would give the opportunity to acquire good practices.

The third, seemingly the biggest challenge, is to give the members of the student government a sense of autonomy. This provision of a need that is crucial for building internal motivation can be supported both by the university authorities treating students subjectively by allowing them to co-decide, and by internal processes within the student government itself. Using the assumptions of the SDT theory, it can be assumed that leadership that is characterized by respect for the individual and creating opportunities for self-fulfillment in the course of the implementation of the tasks of the student government will be conducive to the sense of autonomy of students. In employee research, among the activities stimulating intrinsic motivation, there are new challenges, continuous stimulation of employees' curiosity, as well as increasing their decision-making responsibility (Miller, 2010) as opposed to, among others, the sense of threat, directiveness and non-constructive evaluation that reduce in this area (Ryan, Deci, 2000b). Bearing in mind the importance of leadership for maintaining intrinsic motivation, it would be worthwhile to periodically monitor the satisfaction of members of the student government in order to effectively catch disturbing signals and take corrective actions. In this case, it also seems beneficial to support people performing managerial functions in the student government through appropriate training activities around leadership competences.

The issue of stimulating internal motivation in students seems to be important not only for building greater involvement in activities at the university. As shown by meta-analyses (Howard et al., 2021; Vasconcellos et al., 2020), this type of motivation is positively associated not only with academic success but with well-being. The latter argument seems particularly important, especially in the context of the deteriorating mental condition.

The qualitative research conducted by the authors should be treated as an introduction to the discussion on the motivation of students to engage in the work of student governments.

When drawing conclusions from the conducted qualitative research, it is also important to remember about its limitations, which include the number of respondents. The study also did not consider contextual variables, such as organizational culture or competences of people holding managerial positions in student governments, their leadership style, as well as the personality traits of the respondents. All of them can be important for the motivation to work in student governments. To confirm the results obtained, it would be worthwhile to conduct research in a quantitative model.

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