Youth Agency: Raising Awareness of 21st Century Global Citizenship in Higher Education

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Abstract

The world has become a place where individuals are expected to acquire certain skills and competencies to keep up with the speed and nature of changing circumstances and adopt conscious and responsible attitudes to become an active part of change. Being an agent of change in the 21st century, a time characterised by environmental and economic havoc, entails a new understanding of citizenship. An increasing number of university courses are being designed to make the young generation more aware of their potential to become civically engaged in social matters. This study employs a qualitative case study which explores changing perspectives of undergraduate students on global citizenship and how they define their role as agents of social change and progress. The authors draw attention to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to demonstrate how the notion of youth agency is redefined through educational practices and new approaches to learning in higher education. Introducing undergraduate students to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) and encouraging them to lead discussions and propose solutions about the existent problems of their country are among the main objectives of the course. The fundamental value of global citizenship becomes more clear when its role in redefining youth agency is considered.

Keywords: Global Citizenship, Agency, SDGs, Sustainability, ESD

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Introduction

Youth agency can be characterised as the willingness of young people to make decisions and initiate social change. Young people's agency may be manifested through multiple forms of behaviour such as resistance, volunteerism, and involvement in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Geographical and social factors closely affect the rate young people are involved in social life. Social institutions like family, school, and state are important determinants of how the youth define and value themselves. The dynamics in the family, state policies and educational practices regarding the welfare of the youth are all influencing factors in the development of agency. Therefore, educational institutions of all levels including higher education have a critical role in equipping the youth with required knowledge and skills to contribute to their understanding of the significance of agency. Initiating a youth agenda, prioritising the welfare of the young population and addressing their changing needs especially in the 21st century will undoubtedly enable young people to define themselves as conscious and respected citizens of their communities. What is highlighted in this paper is one dimension of this effort, namely the contribution of new educational practices in higher education to the redefinition of young people as responsible citizens.

Theoretical Framework

Global Citizenship/Active Citizenship as a New Concept and Youth Agency

The 21st century notion of citizenship encompasses a new understanding which is associated with social engagement of individuals within an inclusive society. The changing focus towards citizenship that necessitates full participation and collaboration has led to the emergence of new approaches to citizenship definitions. The necessity to fully participate in the social, cultural, economic and political life of a country has initially arisen as a challenge for individuals who do not yet define themselves as active citizens. For them, as Percy-Smith asserts, citizenship cannot be practised only through everyday activities (2015). With the increase in academic research about youth studies, a need to conceptualise notions like identity, agency and selfhood has also emerged. This has led to many important changes in various spheres of life as well. Educators, for instance, have seen it necessary to redefine their course objectives in line with the needs of the young generation. Policy makers have to adjust their welfare policies in order to foster inclusion of young people as socially engaged, responsible citizens of the country. All these attempts underline agency as an important component of identity. In other words, youth agency has become a means for young people to define who they are.

Agency is defined as "the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources and histories, as embedded within structures of power" (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 18). Youth agency refers to the willingness and decisiveness of young people to be part of the change. The critical question here is how young people have a sense of agency and how this, in turn, helps them participate in the social life of their culture and become agents of change. The agency of young people is determined by various factors such as family, education environment, socioeconomic conditions and culture. Being raised in a family restricting or encouraging self-expression and having or not having access to varied learning experiences can be counted as influential factors in agency. Since the focus of this paper is an evaluation of youth agency in a higher education context, the discussion will revolve mostly around educational practices that foster youth agency.

In her article "What is Student Agency and Why Is It Needed Now More Than Ever?", Vaughn (2020) examines student agency through examples of good practices at schools that cultivate the agency of their students. Associating student agency with three dimensions, namely dispositional, motivational, and positionality of individuals, Vaughn (2020) underlines that the quality of education depends on the interaction among certain components of education. In other words, student agency is determined not only by teacher-student interaction but the role of school leaders, policy makers, and teacher educators also matter. Vaughn also points out that agency is "co-created" in a school environment with the guidance of teachers and peers. What is critical in the creation of agency is the role course curriculum, assessment choices, and student participation play. Rather than formalising education in the conventional way of delivering lectures to a class of students listening to the lecturer passively, allowing students to demonstrate their agency during courses guarantees a more fulfilling learning experience. Courses that foster creativity and critical thinking skills of students enable them to develop different perspectives and a more liberating mindset whereas tasks that necessitate group work and thus collaboration make them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Conceptualization of student agency, in this respect, entails viewing students as "entrepreneurial", "generative", and "choice-making" individuals (Tran & Vu, 2018; Vaughn, 2020).

Evaluating youth agency in a classroom context necessarily includes a full understanding of student agency, yet research on the agency of young adults has shown that youth agency is a broader concept encompassing youth participation in social projects, active engagement with social issues, and commitment to contributing to the efforts for social development and sustainability. Just as educational institutions like schools and universities play a major role in their students' development of agency, public institutions and states have a significant effect on young people's being accepted as active citizens of their countries. Youth is perceived as "a transitory stage from childhood to adulthood" (Yılmaz, 2017) and it is situated "in a binary category" referring on the one hand to their "vulnerable" personalities and on the other hand their potential to contribute to public welfare (DeJaeghere, McCleary & Josić, 2016). It is then highly important to understand how educational research conceptualises the notion in order for institutions to foster agency. Since youth occupy a transitory stage and find themselves in a continuous struggle to define their identities, goals, and aspirations in life, it is necessary to evaluate youth agency in line with the realities of their life. Changing social conditions of each country and cultural environment determine how young people are in the social and political life of their countries. For any educational activity aiming to develop agency, it is obviously necessary to take these changing constituents into consideration. Young people who can find the opportunity to understand their roles as active and responsible citizens of their countries develop agency and a complete sense of identity. Courses that focus on social issues of the world create a ground for university students to critically evaluate and understand contemporary debates on global problems and the need for sustainable development. It is even more important if such courses foster youth agency to a certain extent that encourages young people to take an active role in the decision-making mechanisms of public institutions and organisations.

Sustainable Development Goals and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

University courses that introduce global issues pertaining to social development provide opportunities to develop consciousness about sociocultural dynamics of a country. Furthermore, the emphasis of such courses on agency makes young people aware of their priorities and redefine their future plans. Courses designed with a particular purpose to create

the necessary "supports and conditions that allow them to pursue what they value" (DeJaeghere, McCleary & Josić, 2016, p.13) enhance the agency of young people by making them aware of their potential contributions for public welfare. With their emphasis on global issues and creative solutions for sustainable development, ESD courses play a critical role in fostering youth agency. Since educators have the chance to confront their students with contemporary issues of the world through a comprehensive sustainability-oriented curriculum, schools and universities function as educational settings that raise awareness of and a sense of responsibility for societal problems. Declaring 2005-2014 as the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, UN defines ESD as such:

> ESD equally addresses all three pillars of sustainable development - society, environment and economy - with culture as an essential additional and underlying dimension. By embracing these elements in a holistic and integrated manner, ESD enables all individuals to fully develop the knowledge, perspectives, values and skills necessary to take part in decisions to improve the quality of life both locally and globally on terms which are most relevant to their daily lives.

Conceptualising sustainable development as a multi-dimensional principle of social life, UN highlights the role education plays in promoting equality, conscious consumption, decent work, and human rights. Moreover, the necessity for collaboration among educational institutions for the integration of ESD within the mainstream education policy of countries also goes hand in hand with the UN 2030 agenda and its focus on partnerships among institutions. This UN initiative to integrate the notion of sustainable development in the education policy of countries has obviously led to an increase in the number of courses specifically designed around the concept of sustainable development. The efforts to integrate sustainable development in education have so far resulted in the creation of new curriculums and education programs in elementary and secondary schools. Through these new adjustments, particularly secondary school students are expected to have an understanding of ecological, political, economic and social issues. In higher education; however, the emphasis on sustainable development has not been a mainstream policy yet and the number of universities providing bachelor's degrees is limited to a few (Venkataraman, 2009). SDGs are rather used as a roadmap by many universities to prepare their curriculums and plans. The University of the West of England, Bristol, and Okayama University for instance, have embraced the SDG agenda and adjusted their faculties and activities with an aim to contribute to the 17 SDGs (Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020). With respect to research on SDGs in higher education, there is an abundance of case studies and research demonstrating how new practices in higher education contribute to the realisation of Sustainable Development Goals. The International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education publishes significant cases and the findings of research projects from all around the world to show how implementations and practices in higher education encourage new innovations and positive changes. To exemplify a few, Ferguson and Roofe (2020) analyse the importance of higher education in the realisation of SDG 4 by explaining how the University of West Indies School of Education leads the SDG4 agenda with its education practices. Another example is Dalla Gasperina, Mazutti, Brandli, and Rabello's case study (2022) that demonstrates the effects of smart campus practices in a Brazilian university. The University of Strathclyde's integration of "research-based education for sustainable development" (Strachan et al., 2019) is another important example that testifies the social impact of SDG focus in higher education practices. In this respect, the value of this study conducted in Turkiye is that it also provides a positive example to the integration of an SDG-related undergraduate course at a state university. What

makes the study novel is its particular focus on the relation of the course to the development of youth agency and SDG awareness within the young population.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to explore undergraduate students' changing perspectives of global citizenship and how they define their role as agents of social change and progress. The research design of the study is a qualitative case study, which is defined as "...an intensive study of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units…" (Gerring, 2006, p. 37). The research was conducted at a large state university in Turkiye, where a new and innovative course has been integrated into the curriculum to enhance the students' academic English skills through content concentrating on SDGs and conducting course delivery and assessment with a specific focus on 21st century learning skills. In accordance with ethics regulations, permission was received from the ethics committee of the University where the study was conducted. The participants were asked to sign a consent form and no incentives were given.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the study, data was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews through an interview form, which comprised 5 demographic and 9 open-ended questions. According to Hammond and Wellington, the interview is valuable because it allows the researcher to delve further into an interviewee's "thoughts, values, feelings, and perspectives" in general. In semi-structured interviews, the same set of open-ended questions is asked to each participant, but the interview can go in unexpected directions, which was the case in the current study. (2021, pp. 109-110). The results of the semi-structured interviews were analysed through thematic analysis (Krippendorf, 2004). Thematic analysis is used with qualitative data for locating, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes, which are built on the foundation of codes, anchored by common concepts enabling the researcher to organise the data within a framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Study Group

The study group of the study was determined through purposeful sampling since "it involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Cresswell & Plano Clark as cited in Palinkas et al., 2016). Accordingly, 18 freshman level students studying in a range of departments in the same university participated in the study. Demographic information of the participants is illustrated in Table 1 below:

	Department	Age	Year	Gender
Participant 1	Industrial Design	22	Freshman	Male
Participant 2	Control and Automation Engineering	20	Freshman	Male
Participant 3	Mathematics Engineering	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 4	Molecular Biology & Genetics	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 5	Electrical Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 6	Mathematics Engineering	18	Freshman	Female
Participant 7	Mathematics Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 8	Meteorological Engineering	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 9	Control and Automation Engineering	21	Freshman	Male
Participant 10	Electrical Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 11	Economics	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 12	Metallurgical and Materials Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 13	Control and Automation Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 14	Geomatics Engineering	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 15	Environmental Engineering	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 16	Electrical Engineering	19	Freshman	Male
Participant 17	Urban and Regional Planning	19	Freshman	Female
Participant 18	Geophysics Engineering	20	Freshman	Male

Table 1. Study Group

Findings and Discussion

The following themes emerged from the face-to-face interviews with participants.

Youth Interest Focus

With regard to the focus of the youth in the scope of agency concerning sustainability, a majority of participants conferred concepts related with environmental sustainability such as recycling, ecology, energy sources, industry, clean environment, consumption, liveable world, green, life, nature, ecosystem, and renewability. Fewer number of participants mentioned concepts related with social sustainability referring to such specific concepts as equality, ideal order, continuity, consciousness and collaboration. Some touched upon the importance of global citizenship as seen in the following quote: "Being a world citizen…there are no boundaries between countries now. We have access to more people by

means of the internet but this also leads to harm in the natural environment. Being a world citizen accordingly means becoming aware of all these and doing something for the environment". [Participant 4]

According to participants, the current era requires the interest focus of the youth in fulfilling the necessities brought along with its offerings. Within the scope, participants prioritise the issues of the current era as global warming, clean water, clean energy sources, consumption, climate change, access to basic necessities, education, equality, justice and peace. Also, thinking globally, intercountry collaborations, awareness of and sensitivity about SDGs, conscious citizenship to turn the world into a better place and virtual citizenship are prominent concepts as expressed by participants. However, some considerations are articulated regarding the increase in responsibility brought by the current era; as alleged in the following quote: "We have access to a vast quantity of information but this has also brought a great many responsibilities. We have seen that a global issue has influenced all of us. We need to have a command of several topics, have the ability to inform ourselves and people around us being knowledgeable about world issues". [participant 5]

Concerning the youth interest focus, the role of education has been underlined as well. As asserted by participant 17, "Educated people have awareness regarding those concepts. It is of utmost importance to educate others so that they can understand us when we discuss such issues". [participant 17] Also, the importance of knowledge dissemination throughout wider populations has been indicated as an influencing factor in raising and forming collective consciousness. "I can use these skills in my own life, for example while following daily news or while doing assignments for school. A university student needs to be engaged in a number of disciplines and be able to apply a multidisciplinary approach. I know I cannot do much alone for global issues. It will be influential only when everybody is equipped with these skills". [participant 4]

Youth Awareness

The world we live in necessitates global knowledge and particular skills to keep up with the speed of changing circumstances in terms of environmental and societal issues. In many participants' discourse in the current study, being aware of global issues and thinking globally have been stated as the most critical traits of the current era, which was characterised by participant 8 as "a dynamic century where everything is fast not only in our country but also across the world as the Z generation. Technology and its blessings are recently settling; a transition period where we are evolving into technology and we are aware of more thanks to social media". [Participant 8] Surplus of information and the relative ease in accessing information compared to previous times have also been mentioned as constituent features of the current era, which requires increased consciousness in the youth not only to subsist but also to make a contribution. Therefore, many participants expressed the significance of awareness and conscious citizenship with regard to integration with the nature, societal challenges, consideration of global issues from different perspectives and knowledge of SDGs, as prioritised by participant 9 as: "…having knowledge about SDGs, being conscious to embellish the world and taking responsibility". [Participant 9] Thinking that awareness about civic and political issues is a prerequisite for engagement, young people in this study are observed to have the basic information regarding contemporary issues. Defining engagement as a "cognitive process that implies the assumption of awareness towards civic or political matters", Bee and Kaya (2017) differentiate engagement and participation. While engagement is cognitive, participation is "behavioural", which indicates the necessity to take

active part in these matters. Regarding youth awareness, the participants are observed to be engaged in global issues to an extent that will help them define their role as active citizens. In the scope of youth awareness, participants in the study also draw attention to the importance of guidance and support from older generations in raising their awareness and room for development.

It is a fact that education has a critical role in contributing to youth awareness and consciousness about global issues. In this regard, the participants discuss the role of education concentrating on a specific course designed to raise their awareness about world issues with a particular focus on SDGs and how they started to realise the activities conducted in the specific field while enhancing their knowledge through research assignments. Although some of them stated being familiar with a certain number of SDGs, the focus of education on the issue increased their understanding in terms of the need for knowledge sharing across the world, the range and kind of issues, and methods of solutions that have been applied so far. As participant 7 explains: "I asked questions to myself that I had never asked before about our planet and its future". [participant 7] Participants highlight that they now have widened perspectives about world issues and they adopt a more analytical approach towards those issues. "Almost none of us were aware of the SDGs. We were not expecting it as the title of the course was different. Our interest has increased also thanks to our instructor's teaching methodology. Speaking for myself, I have learned a lot". [Participant 18]

Youth Active Engagement

In the scope of active engagement, participants mention taking and fulfilling responsibility being part of the society, sensitivity for surrounding challenges, being part of the decision for country of citizenship, appreciating as well as criticising, engaging with and trying to find solutions for societal issues not only in the country of origin but also across the world. As indicated by participant 11, "Be knowledgeable about and responsive to events taking place around the immediate context, be able to react and take actions". [participant 11] Within this framework, a majority of participants highlight the significance of youth contribution for the efforts made for a more sustainable world, as discussed in the following quote: "Most of the contribution will come from the youth indeed. We are recently becoming aware of issues. We will be constructing the jobs of the future". [participant 6]

In line with perceptions regarding active engagement, a majority of participants involved in the study also mention the importance of taking part in a Non-Governmental Organisation activity and civic engagement, some pointing out their engagement as in the following quote: "I had volunteered for TEMA (Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion) and I have completed 5 basic modules of AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) online. In the future, I would like to work for Darüşşafaka". [Participant 5] and some stating reasons for not being involved so far and their will to do so, as put forth by participant 14: "I have not been involved in such an activity so far but I would really love to. I have not had the opportunity. I have visited orphanages and nursing homes with my family". [Participant 14] The study has revealed that young people have a satisfactory level of awareness about global issues and willingness to be a part of NGOs; however, their active participation in NGOs has been to a limited extent due to various reasons as opposed to what Erdoğan and Semerci (2017) argue in terms of the necessity of participation of every single citizen for the establishment and maintenance of justice in societies. In this regard, it is of utmost importance to have access channels available for the youth to contribute to public welfare.

Being part of the solution for surrounding issues in the immediate context and at the global level can be enhanced through education. Hence, not only awareness regarding SDGs but also skills required in the current era, namely 21st century skills, play a critical role in promoting civic engagement of participants in world issues. Almost all of the participants included in the study highlighted the contribution of education with a particular focus on world issues and methods to follow to find solutions. "I have not found a solution to a global problem yet, but I have used these skills in my own life, my own assignments and social environment and they have proved really beneficial". [Participant 3] Also, concerning the skills to be utilised while offering solutions to global issues and thus becoming part of the solution has been elaborated on as stated by participant 8, "During class, our instructor frequently asks us questions that require us to think critically and we sometimes exchange information about our responses. This has taught me collaboration and enhanced my sophisticated thinking skills. My creativity skills have been boosted while brainstorming for issues discussed in class. Especially research assignments focusing on finding solutions to global issues have contributed to my skills for offering solutions". [participant 8]

Conclusion

This paper highlights the awareness and consciousness of the youth of global citizenship and their willingness for civic engagement and active participation in the solution of global societal challenges. The perceptions have been articulated with reference to practices in an undergraduate level course specifically designed to enhance students' communication skills while raising their awareness regarding sustainable development and to help them become responsible citizens employing 21st century learning skills. This work contributes to the generation of knowledge regarding changing perceptions and level of awareness of the youth of global issues and how education can facilitate their contribution to public welfare. The results provide valuable information for policy makers as well as professionals in the field of higher education. However, this study is not without limitations. The study was conducted in a single university asking perceptions of 18 undergraduate level students. Therefore, the results cannot be considered representative of the whole population of university students.

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