

# THE ROLE AND POSITION OF STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARIBOR

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Students are a key part of the University of Maribor, which would not exist in principle without them. Over the decades, the number of students has grown and today there are more than 15,000 students studying at the University of Maribor. Their involvement in activities to represent student interests and develop extracurricular activities at the local and national level has been ever-present. The latter plays an important role as it contributes to the development of competences, social networks and the quality of student life. Student representation, particularly through student councils, ensures the representation of students' rights and interests and enables their participation in decision-making. The University of Maribor enables students to participate in governance, as representatives are present in all decision-making bodies, including the Vice-Rector and the Vice-Deans for Student Affairs. Students have thus actively co-shaped the University and contributed to its current position in Slovenia and abroad, to its internationalisation and to its broader social development.

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## 1 The Importance of Student Representation at the University of Maribor

Students are an integral part of the university community, as a university cannot exist without them. They participate in activities that contribute to the success of the university. Their knowledge and later career achievements would not be possible without the university providing a quality support environment for the development of knowledge, additional skills, and career opportunities. Students are the largest stakeholder group in higher education and, at the same time, those who have the opportunity to co-create the environment in which they acquire knowledge, skills, and competences for the future.

At the University of Maribor, the number of students has increased over the decades, proving that the university remains an attractive choice for young people from Slovenia and the wider region. From its inception and throughout its development, the number of students has grown, and today, according to the Department for Education and Study, more than 15,000 students are enrolled. The faculties offer students a wide range of study programmes and extracurricular activities. Over the years, the University of Maribor has become one of the key pillars of Slovenian higher education and continues to hold this position today. It has followed development trends in higher education and adapted to the needs of the economy and society. It has also played an important role in co-deciding on higher education in Slovenia, actively participating in discussions on reforms, legislative changes, and the development of the academic environment. In addition, it has been continuously integrated into the international academic environment. The internationalization of higher education has become one of the key goals of modern universities, and the University of Maribor has successfully followed European and global trends in higher education. There is a noticeable increase in the number of international students, the development of joint study programmes with other universities, and strengthened cooperation in research, educational, and other projects at national and international levels.

Students study within study programmes, but university life is not limited to the pedagogical process in classrooms and taking exams. Extracurricular activities are crucial for students, as they are an important part of growth, development, and shaping a comprehensive academic experience. They enable students to develop so-called soft skills (communication, teamwork, organization, and leadership), connect

with students from other universities and countries (broadening horizons and networks), gain practical experience (helpful for career development), participate in sports, cultural, and social activities (contributing to physical and mental health), and engage in student representation (where they can actively influence the development of the university and the position of students within and beyond the university).

Currently, extracurricular activities at the university are mainly provided by student councils of the faculties, which are important bodies representing student interests and ensuring the development of quality student life at the university. They also play an important role in co-deciding on key issues at faculties and the university, as they participate in adopting regulations, study programmes, and other documents.

Extracurricular activities have played an important role at the university since its very beginning, as students organized cultural events, student media, sports activities, and various initiatives enriching student life even before the official establishment of the University of Maribor (Bračič, 1984).

Students demonstrated efforts to improve their position even before the university was founded, actively participating in discussions on the development of higher education in Slovenia during the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and in the development of Maribor (Bračič, 1975). Today, this tradition continues, as through student councils and other organizations, students actively represent their views and advocate for quality education, improved student standards, and conditions for successful academic and extracurricular engagement.

Student representation has proven to be an important force in shaping the university community throughout the development of the University of Maribor, as students have been involved in co-decision-making from the very beginning. This gives them an important position, as they serve as vice-deans and vice-rector, forming part of the leadership of the university and faculties and being directly involved in decision-making at the highest levels. Furthermore, the Statute of the University of Maribor (Univerza v Mariboru, 2025) currently stipulates that students hold one-fifth of the seats in every governing body, both at the faculty and university level. Students have a Vice-Rector for Student Affairs, who is part of the university leadership and represents the rights and interests of students. By function, the Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and the Vice-Deans for Student Affairs also serve as presidents of the Student Council of the university and its faculties. In the Student Dormitories

of the University of Maribor, students have their own representative body – the Student Council of Dormitory Residents. Thus, students are appropriately represented at all levels and can advocate for improving their position and developing extracurricular activities. Faculty Student Councils are composed of two representatives (members) from each year, elected for one year in transparent elections held by November 14 for the current academic year. Each year can elect five student representatives, with the two receiving the highest number of votes gaining voting rights in the faculty's Student Council, while the others form the advisory group of the council. All five representatives for a given year constitute the Student Council of that year. In Student Dormitories, the Student Council consists of one representative from each dormitory, also elected during faculty council elections. The Student Council of the University of Maribor is composed of members and their deputies, with each faculty having one member and one deputy, elected for a two-year term. Candidates are elected at meetings of the faculty Student Councils. Students also have representatives in all university and faculty committees and governing bodies, including management boards. At faculties, the Vice-Dean for Student Affairs is part of the faculty's management board, while at the university level, students have a representative on the University of Maribor Management Board.

Extracurricular activities are funded from various sources, most of which are received by Student Councils at faculties and coordinated by the University Student Council. Each year, the council receives funds for co-financing student interest activities, contributions paid by students upon enrolment (student interest activity fee), and funds from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation intended for developing extracurricular activities. These funds finance the operation of faculty Student Councils, which submit their annual project work plans (content and financial evaluation) in response to the Call for Co-financing and receive funds for their activities, which they later report on. Remaining funds are used for university-level Student Council projects organized for all students and some student representatives (e.g., training and networking activities). Part of the funds is also allocated for compensation for work performed by student representatives (presidents of faculty and university councils and students actively assisting with major projects) and for covering professional support for student representation provided by the Student Affairs Office at the university. Without adequate funding, the functioning of student representation would not be possible, as project

implementation costs are rising, and the workload of student representatives in top positions increases each year as the university expands and develops.

Below, we provide information on the development of student representation and extracurricular activities organized by Student Councils, as these have significantly influenced the development of the University of Maribor and the inclusion of students in decision-making processes.<sup>1</sup>

## **2 Development of Student Representation at the University of Maribor**

### **2.1 The Period up to 1993**

Student representation at the University of Maribor gradually evolved from informal initiatives into structured organizations during the first decades of the university's existence, gaining an increasingly important role in the academic and broader social environment.

Already in the 1960s, student representation began to develop, and in 1959 the student organization Association of Students of Maribor Junior Colleges was established (later transformed into ŠOUM), which addressed student issues through its committees (Kšela et al., 2024). At that time, freshmen events were organized, the student newspaper *Katedra* was published, and the Cultural and Artistic Society Študent began its activities. The Student and Pupil Cooperative was also opened, as well as the first self-service restaurant Center, and the first two student dormitories (Dorm I and II) in the Tyrševa residential area. The first freshmen event, organized by students of the Junior Technical College, took place on October 30, 1960. In 1964, the duration of studies at Maribor's junior colleges was approximately three years and one month, rising to three years and seven months by 1969. During this period, students faced low progression rates between years and unsatisfactory academic performance, often withdrawing from exams or passing with the lowest positive grades (Darin, 1979).

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<sup>1</sup> In preparing this chapter, we relied on sources available in the digital and physical archives of the University of Maribor, the University of Maribor Library, and the Regional Archive Maribor. Despite a thorough review of sources, we acknowledge the possibility that some projects, events, or important information were not included, as they were not preserved in archives and therefore inaccessible. We have aimed to present as comprehensively as possible the development of student representation at the University of Maribor and the key milestones that have shaped its role in the academic space.

From the establishment of the University of Maribor in 1975, students actively participated in decision-making regarding the study process, teaching quality, student standard, and other important issues affecting their lives and work.

Student representation operated within the broader context of higher education reforms and social changes marking the transition from the socialist system to independent Slovenia. Key developments included the formalization of student councils, the establishment of the Student Organization of the University of Maribor (ŠOUM) (Kšela et al., 2024), and improvements in student living standards, largely due to the efforts of student representatives.

The University of Maribor was officially proclaimed on September 19, 1975, merging several higher education institutions already operating in the city. Among the university's key goals were the development of higher education adapted to economic needs and strong emphasis on cooperation between teachers and students as equal participants in the teaching-research process (Bračič, 1984).

When the agreement on the merger was signed, each faculty had a student co-signatory, symbolically highlighting the greater role of students in the new university. The decision to establish the university was confirmed at the University Council session on February 27, 1976, when Vladimir Bračič was appointed Rector (Bračič, 1984). Two Vice-Rectors were also appointed: Rudi Crnkovič from the ranks of teachers and Miroslav Rebernik as the student representative (Vice-Rector for Students). This made the University of Maribor the first university in Yugoslavia to appoint a student as Vice-Rector (Rebernik, n.d.).

In the first decade of the university's existence, significant changes occurred, also affecting students and their organization. The main goals were (Toplak, 2000):

- transformation of higher schools into faculties,
- development of postgraduate studies,
- establishment of international connections,
- improvement of student living standards and
- construction of student dormitories.

One major success of student organizing was the construction of new dormitories and a shared facility on Gosposvetska cesta (today known as ŠTUK). Plans also included the construction of student clinics and premises for additional activities, though these plans were not fully realized.

In the 1980s, student representation was closely connected within and beyond the university in the local environment. Student representatives at the University of Maribor were mainly linked through the University Conference of the Socialist Youth Alliance of Slovenia (*Sl. Univerzitetna konference Zveze socialistične mladine Slovenije*, UK ZMS), considered a precursor to today's Student Organization of Slovenia. Other student initiatives emerged during this period, critically addressing existing organizations and advocating for greater fairness in higher education. Important voices of the student movement included Radio Študent, Tribuna (in Ljubljana), and Katedra (in Maribor) (Toplak, 2000).

After the dissolution of UK ZSMS, the Student Organization of the University of Maribor (ŠOUM) was officially established in 1992, introducing its own representative body – the Student Parliament. Mechanisms for financing extracurricular activities were also created, implemented through the student committee (the predecessor of today's Committee for Student Interest Activities – KIDŠ) (Toplak, 2000).

In addition to formalizing student organizations, key social support mechanisms for students were introduced during this period (Toplak, 2000):

- scholarships from joint funds replaced state and foundation scholarships (e.g., France Munda and Žiga Zois scholarships); in 1993, 55% of students received scholarships;
- at students' proposal, the state budget included a meal subsidy in the form of vouchers – the beginning of today's subsidized student meal system.

In 1993, the Higher Education Act came into force, bringing significant changes to university and student representation:

- UM received legal entity status, and faculties had newly regulated areas for implementing study programmes;

- for the first time at the national level, student councils of faculties and universities were legally recognized as the highest representative bodies of students at their respective institutions (“Zakon o visokem šolstvu (ZViS)”, 1993).

The Student Council of the University of Maribor gained the following powers (Toplak, 2000):

- providing opinions on the university statute and its amendments;
- deciding on general acts, study programmes, and proposals concerning student rights and obligations;
- appointing student representatives to working bodies of university bodies;
- participating in the university’s self-evaluation process;
- allocating funds for student interest activities.

Alongside official representation, students organized numerous extracurricular activities in the early years of the university (Toplak, 2000):

- In 1964, the Cultural and Artistic Society Študent (KUD Študent) was founded to promote cultural activities.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, students regularly organized university sports leagues and revived the rowing regatta on the Drava River.
- In 1990, Maribor Radio Študent (MARŠ) and Academic Publishing House Katedra were established.
- The academic choir gained its own space (APEZEUM), and cultural activities developed through various student initiatives.

Student newspapers such as *Spekter*, *Organon*, *Agronom*, and *Varia*, as well as newsletters like *ŠOK* and *Štil*, were published. Students also contributed to programmes on Radio Maribor, laying the foundation for the later independent student radio MARŠ (Darin, 1979).

The development of student representation at the University of Maribor up to 1993 was highly dynamic and reflected broader social changes in Slovenia and higher education. During this time, the foundations of modern student organization were laid, with strong emphasis on student rights, involvement in decision-making processes, and improvement of student living standards.

In 1993, student councils and ŠOUM officially assumed the role of key representative bodies of students at the University of Maribor, marking the end of the first era of organized student activity and the beginning of a new phase of student representation in independent Slovenia.

## **2.2 The Period between 1993 and 2004**

During this period, several innovations were introduced in the field of student representation, such as the Regulation on the Provision of Funds and Implementation of the Student Interest Activities Programme (adopted on February 24, 2000), which defined the system of financing and organizing these activities. Funds were provided from various sources and were intended to support projects in culture, sports, science, and voluntary activities. Special emphasis was placed on encouraging students to participate in research and development initiatives that strengthened their innovative potential and contributed to the progress of the university (Univerza v Mariboru, Študentski svet, 2000a, 2000b).

In 2000, student interest activities focused on improving conditions for student organization, strengthening cooperation between students and faculties, and connecting with the local environment (Čuš, 2006). Great importance was also attached to the development of sports activities and artistic initiatives, which contributed to the greater visibility of the University of Maribor both in Slovenia and internationally.

By participating in student activities, students gained valuable experiences that went beyond formal education. Active involvement in projects and organizations enabled them to develop organizational and leadership skills and strengthen social networks, which improved their employability after graduation. The University of Maribor was already establishing itself as a dynamic academic centre that, in addition to quality education, offered broad opportunities for personal and professional development of its students.

For decades, the University of Maribor has advocated for the active involvement of students in decision-making processes, with student councils playing a central role. Their organization and functioning were regulated in detail by the Regulation on the Composition and Functioning of Student Councils, adopted on January 18, 2000 (Univerza v Mariboru, 2000).

This regulation provided a formal framework for participation and shaping the student community. The regulation defined a hierarchical structure of student representation. At the lowest level were year councils, addressing specific needs of individual years and study programmes. Next was the faculty student council, bringing together representatives of different years and programmes within a faculty or college. At the top was the University Student Council, acting as the central body representing the interests of all students and participating in shaping university policy.

The regulation also detailed student council election procedures, which ensured the legitimacy of these bodies by stating:

- Elections are direct, secret, and based on equal voting rights for all students; any student with active status can run and vote.
- The election process is divided into several stages, supervised by election committee; each faculty has a local committee, while the university has a central committee responsible for legality, candidate verification, and publication of results; committees also act as appeal bodies, ensuring transparency.
- An important task of student councils is the participation in the university's self-evaluation process; through this, students actively contribute to improving the quality of study programmes and the learning environment; their opinions and proposals serve as valuable feedback for university bodies, fostering dynamic development of the academic community (Univerza v Mariboru, 2000).

Faculty Student Councils and the University of Maribor Student Council represent the backbone of student participation and democratic decision-making within the university. The Regulation laid solid foundations for the functioning of student councils as we know them today.

At the same time, students gained representatives in academic bodies through amendments to the Statute of the University of Maribor and the Higher Education Act (adopted in 1993) (Univerza v Mariboru, 1995; "ZViS", 1993). The University Student Council positively assessed the work of the Vice-Rector and Vice-Deans but pointed out legal limitations affecting their functioning. Obstacles included resistance to changes in the university statute, blocking the establishment of new faculties, delaying international cooperation processes, supporting long-term students, and discrediting student representatives. The University of Maribor

Student Council therefore demanded that representatives of university student councils, not only the Student Organization of Slovenia, be appointed to the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Student Affairs (Emeršič, 2001). This marked the first formal inclusion of the highest student representatives of the University of Maribor in national bodies dealing with student and higher education issues.

During this period, the Declaration on Rights and Access to Education in the Republic of Slovenia was also being drafted (Univerza v Mariboru, Študentski svet, 2001). Based on Article 57 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (“Ustava Republike Slovenije”, 1991), which guarantees the right to education, the principles of a social state, and youth political organizations, student and pupil organizations as well as student councils demanded:

- the abolition of tuition fees and other financial contributions by students,
- facilitating construction of student dormitories,
- higher social support for students and pupils,
- preservation of the student work system,
- tax relief for student and pupil income,
- decentralization of higher education,
- improvement of the quality of higher education,
- prevention of addressing budget deficits at the expense of students.

In the academic year 2000/2001, the University of Maribor adopted amendments to the Regulation on the Provision and Implementation of the Student Interest Activities Programme (Univerza v Mariboru, Študentski svet, 2000a). These changes represented an important step toward greater transparency, efficiency, and organization in financing and implementing extracurricular activities, which are essential for student life.

The amendments more precisely defined the responsibilities of the University Student Council and faculty student councils in organizing and managing interest activities. The University Student Council was granted a clearly defined right to implement interest activities within the framework of the regulation, university acts, and legislation, with funds obtained from these activities allocated exclusively for financing new projects. This strengthened student autonomy in designing and implementing activities that enrich their study experience.

An important element of the changes was a fairer distribution of funds among student councils. The previous provision that allocated funds in fixed percentages was abolished, allowing greater flexibility in allocating financial resources according to the needs of individual projects. At the same time, a mechanism for reallocating unused funds was introduced, ensuring better utilization of financial resources.

The financing system was supplemented with stricter control, as changes were introduced in the reporting process on fund usage. The amendments required project implementers to submit detailed content and financial reports, ensuring greater transparency in fund management.

The amendments expanded the range of activities that student councils and student organizations could organize, including:

- publishing activities, including issuing publications and advertising,
- organization of educational seminars and professional excursions,
- cultural and entertainment events,
- sports and recreational activities.

More precise conditions for calls and project selection were also established, with priority given to projects implemented across multiple university members (interfaculty cooperation). This strengthened collaboration between faculties and enabled the implementation of larger, university-oriented projects.

Changes were also introduced in the functioning of the Committee for Student Interest Activities, which gained expanded powers in overseeing project activities. The Committee was responsible for:

- reviewing and selecting projects in public calls,
- preparing the development programme for student interest activities,
- monitoring the use of funds and equipment intended for projects,
- communicating with the public about activity implementation.

A supervisory committee was also established, overseeing project implementation and financial flows, with members from the Student Council, the University Management Board, and rectorate professional services.

This document established more transparent financial practices, strengthened the autonomy of student councils, and increased opportunities for developing diverse extracurricular activities.

A proposal for organizing sports at the University of Maribor was also presented. Sports activities were accessible to all students and staff and were mandatory for first-year students. Programmes included basic and advanced levels and were implemented by the Chair of University Sports at the University of Maribor. First-year students participated free of charge, funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport (Univerza v Mariboru, Študentski svet, 2000b).

The Sports Committee at the University of Maribor consisted of the Vice-Rector for Education, the head of the sports office, representatives of the University Student Council, the Chair of Sports, ŠOUM, and sports associations. Their tasks were supervision and organization of sports activities.

The proposed solutions ensured a systematic arrangement of sports education and the inclusion of all students and staff in sports activities.

Various opportunities for student projects at the University of Maribor were available during this period. These projects included the development of a study database, a student newspaper, and the creation of websites for university student councils (Razpis študentskih projektov, 2000).

The study database aimed to provide students with continuous access to academic resources from all faculties under the university, enabling the transfer of study materials. The project aimed to have at least 700 resources available by the end of 2001 and offer students a platform for contributing materials. It was anticipated that the database would be accessible online, promoting the university's academic achievements and enabling advertising.<sup>2</sup>

The student newspaper project aimed to encourage the creation of faculty-specific newspapers, enabling students to report on university activities and important events. The goal was to increase student engagement and promote university life while offering students opportunities to develop critical thinking and journalistic skills.

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<sup>2</sup> No precise data on the success of such a database were found.

The student council website project involved creating online platforms providing detailed information on council operations and financing. Websites would allow students to submit opinions and suggestions, contributing to greater transparency and communication within the university.

Between 1995 and 2004, issues related to subsidized student meals in Slovenia were addressed. Student meal vouchers were introduced as a system of financial support to ensure access to a hot meal at a subsidized price. Despite good intentions, the system faced numerous challenges and changes over the years, often causing dissatisfaction among students. One major problem was the subsidy amount, which did not always keep pace with actual food price increases. This meant students still had to cover a significant portion of meal costs, posing a financial burden for many. There were also accessibility issues – some food providers restricted voucher use, or the selection of subsidized meals was limited and of poor quality.

In Maribor, students repeatedly advocated for system improvements. Although there were no major protests between 1995 and 2004, student organizations actively lobbied for better conditions. ŠOUM, through various initiatives, sought higher subsidies, better meal options, and broader voucher accessibility. Many activities were coordinated between ŠOUM and the University of Maribor Student Council from the beginning, as they addressed the same student issues.

On June 19, 2001, the University of Maribor Senate discussed the issue of subsidized student meals at its 9th session. The Vice-Rector for Student Affairs presented the current regulation, which stipulated that subsidies were available only from September to June. The University of Maribor Student Council expressed the view that student activities take place throughout the year and that subsidized meals should also be available during the summer months. The Senate of the University of Maribor then unanimously adopted Resolution 50, expressing support for student demands and calling for the provision of subsidized student meals throughout the entire year. The resolution reflected the efforts of the Maribor academic community to improve the social conditions of students.

Efforts to create a better system of subsidized meals remain a constant task for student representatives. Their goal is to ensure that every student has access to quality and affordable meals, regardless of socio-economic background.

### **2.3 The Period between 2005 and 2014**

In 2005, one of the longest-running projects of the University of Maribor Student Council began, celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2025. We mark twenty years of one of the most important humanitarian initiatives – field blood donation campaigns organized by the University of Maribor Student Council. These campaigns were first carried out in 2005 at the initiative of the Student Council and with the support of the university leadership, becoming an indispensable part of student life. Since then, the campaigns have been organized twice a year, in spring and autumn, enabling students and university staff to donate blood and thus contribute to saving lives. Over two decades, nearly 5,000 students have participated in these campaigns, demonstrating that solidarity, helping others, and social responsibility have become core values of the University of Maribor Student Council. The blood donation campaigns of the University of Maribor Student Council are not merely medical events but also serve as platforms for raising awareness about the importance of blood donation. They are accompanied by numerous informational campaigns and motivational messages encouraging students to take an active social role. Thanks to this long-standing tradition, the campaigns have gained exceptional support among students, university staff, and the wider public.

In addition to humanitarian activities, between 2005 and 2014, the University of Maribor Student Council represented a strong voice for students in the academic environment. In 2005, the role of student councils at faculties and universities was formalized, allowing students greater participation in decision-making on academic matters. During this period, the University of Maribor Student Council became a key partner in improving study programmes, revising curricula, and enhancing the quality of the educational process (Bertoncelj et al., 2015). The University of Maribor Student Council also supported the tutoring system, which became an important support mechanism for new students. In 2010, at the initiative of students, a campaign for changes in the organization of exam periods was launched, leading to a more flexible system for fulfilling academic obligations. Amendments to the examination regulations were discussed and adopted, representing a significant improvement in the study process. In 2009, the University of Maribor Student Council appointed its first public relations representative, as recorded in the minutes of the 9th regular session of the University Student Council on February 10, 2009.

Alongside academic initiatives, the Student Council organized numerous social events that enriched student life in Maribor. Among the most recognizable was the event “Gremo na prvi rok”, which, at the start of the academic year, helped connect students and introduce them to extracurricular activities and opportunities at the university. Student councils have played and continue to play an important role in this, actively co-creating and preparing numerous extracurricular activities in addition to representing student rights. Various cultural events and sports activities were also organized, further enriching the student experience in Maribor (Bertoncelj et al., 2015).

The period 2005–2014 was also significant due to the expansion of the University of Maribor, which led to an enlarged composition of the University Student Council following the inclusion of new members. During this time, representatives from the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Energy Technology, and Faculty of Tourism joined the University of Maribor Student Council (Bertoncelj et al., 2015).

In addition to organizing events and humanitarian campaigns, the University Student Council also ensured student representation at the national level. It collaborated with other university student councils, national student organizations, and various government institutions, advocating for student interests in areas such as higher education funding, improving study conditions, and managing student dormitories. The University of Maribor Student Council also led initiatives for greater student involvement in decision-making processes regarding university reforms and improvements in education quality.

The period 2005–2014 was a time of intensive development and consolidation of the Student Council’s role within the academic community. Through their organization, students achieved significant changes, improved study conditions, and strengthened their connection with university leadership. Their active participation demonstrated that students, through engagement and dedication, can influence the quality of their education and contribute to shaping a better university community (Bertoncelj et al., 2015).

Over a decade of activity, the University of Maribor Student Council proved that students can be a major driver of change and, through joint efforts, create better conditions for future generations. Through numerous initiatives, from academic

improvements to socially responsible projects, the University of Maribor Student Council established itself as an indispensable part of university life, continuing to play an important role in representing student interests today.

## **2.4 The Period between 2015 and 2025**

Student representation at the University of Maribor entered the period between 2015 and 2025 well-prepared. The efforts of previous generations of student representatives for student rights enabled students to dedicate more of their time and energy to expanding extracurricular activities and improving their own functioning.

Based on Article 195 of the Statute of the University of Maribor (Univerza v Mariboru, 2023), student representatives are actively involved in habilitation (academic promotion) procedures by providing opinions on pedagogical competence. The faculty student council is invited to submit its opinion by the University's Habilitation Office. Since meaningful discussion among students – who are the only ones able to assess a candidate's pedagogical competence firsthand – is essential for a well-founded opinion, efforts were made to conduct these discussions thoroughly. Thus, at the July 2016 meeting of the Vice-Deans' Collegium, it was agreed that opinions on pedagogical competence could only be given at an extraordinary or regular session. Students were well aware of the importance of the student survey, which forms the basis for providing opinions on pedagogical competence. They regularly raised awareness about the survey through various promotional activities and materials distributed among students. The University Student Council and the Collegium of Vice-Deans for Student Affairs cooperate with the Working Group for Preparing and Monitoring the Student Survey, where student representatives can express concerns or suggestions related to the survey. The digitalization of society also brought changes to the range of options and services available to students. Every student receives a digital identity (DI), granting access to services such as email, the Eduroam wireless network, the Academic Information Subsystem (AIPS), the Moodle UM learning environment, Microsoft Office 365, the Digital Library of the University of Maribor (DKUM), portals like Gartner and Statista, etc. Additionally, students can use licensed software for free, such as the statistical analysis programme SPSS, Foxit PDF Editor Pro, the Amebis Besana proofreading tool, and others. These digital services provide students with better study conditions. The "Amendments to the Regulation on the Functioning

and Composition of Student Councils” (Spremembe in dopolnitve Pravidnika o delovanju in sestavi študentskih svetov, 2022) require that invitations and minutes of faculty student council sessions and the University of Maribor Student Council sessions be publicly posted on websites. Compliance with this requirement was repeatedly checked during this period, ensuring adherence to rules and transparency in the functioning of student councils.

Students also demonstrated their engagement by participating in decision-making bodies at the national level, such as the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Student Affairs, where the University of Maribor has its own student representative. Presidents of university student councils also attended sessions of the Rectors’ Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, where they could express opinions on pressing student issues and participate in shaping legislation.

Students at the University of Maribor are deeply involved in extracurricular activities. Among the largest and most prominent projects is the University Sports League for the Champion of the University of Maribor, held every academic year and culminating in April with the final tournament. The league offers students a healthy way to spend their free time while competing in good sportsmanship with their peers. The league includes four competitions: men’s football, men’s basketball, men’s volleyball, and women’s volleyball. Students can cheer for their faculty teams, thanks to student representatives who actively promote the matches. To keep the league engaging, improvements are made every year. In 2023, the Most Valuable Player (MVP) award was introduced for the best player of the final tournament. In 2024, alongside court matches, a fan competition was held, where supporters competed for the title of best cheering group. Student teams also have the opportunity to participate in the international Euroijada competition, further enhancing the reputation and prestige of the University of Maribor.

The blood donation campaigns organized by the University of Maribor Student Council, which began in 2005, celebrated their 20th anniversary in 2025, becoming one of the council’s longest-standing projects. After the challenging period between 2020 and 2022, the campaigns experienced a revival, as reflected in the annual student participation numbers. According to the Slovenian Red Cross – Maribor Regional Association, 59 students participated in 2022, 217 in 2023, and as many as 288 in 2024.

In 2023, the University of Maribor Student Council introduced the idea of organizing a sports competition among Slovenian universities. Thus, in November of the same year, the first Inter-University Sports Competition took place, where representatives of several Slovenian universities competed in football, basketball, and volleyball.

Faculty student councils also contribute to the development of extracurricular activities by organizing numerous projects each year. These projects include educational, humanitarian, sports, entertainment, and promotional activities, as well as participation in various excursions and conferences at home and abroad.

Student representatives faced an unprecedented challenge in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic initially placed student council operations in an uncertain state, and soon all activities were completely halted. Most projects resumed in-person implementation in 2022. In October 2020, faculty student council elections were held digitally for the first time. Based on the Decision on Calling Elections for Faculty Student Councils and Other University Members, issued on October 7, 2020, elections were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Just over a year later, in November 2021, elections were held using the Simply Voting tool. Student representative elections saw another innovation in 2023 when the University Election Committee decided that candidate self-promotion would be allowed under conditions specified in the Decision on Conducting the Election Campaign and Election Rules for Student Council Elections.

In 2023, the importance of training for student representatives was emphasized again. The University of Maribor Student Council began organizing training sessions for student representatives, where students acquired the necessary knowledge to perform their representative roles. They were educated on university operations, student council functioning, habilitation procedures, and the importance of providing opinions on pedagogical competence, along with practical advice and discussions of everyday issues. Vice-Deans for Student Affairs received training at thematic collegium meetings, where experts introduced topics such as the green transition, habilitation, and personal data protection.

In the academic year 2024/2025, the institutional tutoring system was launched at the University of Maribor, aimed at ensuring favourable conditions for the active involvement of all students in university life and to assist in resolving their general

and specific academic challenges from enrolment to graduation. Student representatives actively participated in preparing the Guidelines for Implementing the Tutoring System at the University of Maribor (Univerza v Mariboru, 2023).

### **3 The Future of Student Representation at the University of Maribor**

For five decades, the University of Maribor has shaped an academic and social community in which students are its key co-creators. Their voice is heard and represented at all levels of university governance, thanks in large part to student representation. Looking ahead, its role will remain crucial in ensuring a high-quality academic and extracurricular environment.

#### **3.1 Development of Extracurricular Activities**

In addition to academic development, the university must continue to promote extracurricular activities. Despite past successes in this area, students are expected to face certain challenges in the future. One of the major challenges will be securing sufficient financial resources for the operation of student councils, which organize various extracurricular activities for students. Organizing quality events, workshops, and projects requires funding, which is often limited.

Cultural, sports, entertainment, and educational projects enrich the student experience and foster a strong sense of community. Through their projects, student councils aim to help students acquire competences and knowledge, foster innovation, and build networks, further strengthening their readiness for the labour market. Collaboration with the local community and industry can bring numerous opportunities for students. Increasing opportunities for internships and participation in real-world projects will enable students to gain experience and ease the transition from academia to a professional career.

Costs are constantly rising, so new ways of ensuring stable funding will need to be found. In the future, closer cooperation with the university and external partners will be essential to ensure the long-term sustainability and development of student council activities.

Faculty student councils are funded by the University of Maribor Student Council based on an annual call for proposals, enabling them to successfully organize various events for students. In line with its strategy and goals, the University of Maribor will

continue to recognize the importance of strong student representation and provide appropriate support.

### **3.2 Comprehensive Student Support**

In addition to financing student council activities, it is also necessary to continue caring for students' well-being, both socially and psychologically. Students are the heart of the university, but at the same time, they are one of the most vulnerable groups. Many face financial challenges, heavy academic workloads, and mental health issues. Student work, which enables many to make ends meet, can negatively affect academic success when workloads become excessive. Therefore, it will be important for the university and the wider community to continue providing support – through new high-quality study programmes and training (the role of the university and its faculties), additional scholarships (the role of the state and local communities), more accessible physical and mental health services (the role of healthcare institutions), and greater opportunities for balancing study and work (where the university can play a significant role).

### **3.3 Cooperation in Co-Governance of the University and Its Faculties**

Collaboration between student representatives and university leadership ensures that the needs and interests of students are considered when making important decisions, both at the university and faculty levels. Students actively participate in events, round tables, and discussions, contributing to their personal and academic growth. Connecting student councils and students from different faculties is essential, as cooperation between vice-deans for student affairs and faculty student councils creates a positive dynamic where knowledge, experiences, and best practices are exchanged. Collaboration among representatives of Slovenian universities has also been strengthened, enabling better advocacy for student rights at the national level. Such cooperation between universities will continue to promote greater student mobility and the exchange of ideas, directly contributing to a richer study experience. In addition, student representation plays a key role in providing additional opportunities for students' personal and professional development. Organizing workshops, educational events, and social gatherings allows students to develop competences that will benefit them even after graduation.

Students participate in various committees, university bodies, faculty student councils, and in evaluation and accreditation processes, both national and international, significantly contributing to the quality of university operations and faculty study programmes. In recent years, a decline in student interest in more active roles in committees and governing bodies at faculties and the university has been observed. It is necessary to find appropriate ways to increase student engagement and encourage the development of responsibility among students.

This indicates that students have a very responsible role and that the university recognizes them as important stakeholders in decision-making and co-governance. It is important to understand that efforts to improve student living standards never end. Student representatives at the University of Maribor must engage in discussions both within and outside the university to strengthen students' position. At the national level (Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Student Affairs), they advocate for more accessible and better living conditions for students, flexible meal subsidies, favourable scholarship conditions, equality of student status, and other measures that could ease students' lives during their studies. All these changes can help students focus more easily on their academic and personal growth and, consequently, contribute to the development and reputation of the University of Maribor.

Maintaining and ensuring quality communication between the university and its students will remain crucial. It is important that students are clearly and promptly informed about their rights and obligations, as this contributes to a better understanding of university operations and enables better cooperation among all stakeholders. Digitalization and modern communication channels offer numerous opportunities to improve information accessibility and strengthen the connectedness of the entire student community.

For effective functioning of student representation, it will be necessary to continue promoting cooperation among faculties and strengthening ties between vice-deans for student affairs. Greater connectedness enables faster problem-solving and better organization of joint projects. It is also important to strengthen cooperation with student representatives from other universities, both in Slovenia and internationally. The exchange of best practices and joint advocacy for student rights are key to improving student living standards.

Digitalization and technological progress offer new opportunities to improve teaching methods and access to knowledge. Student representatives will play an important role in promoting innovative learning approaches and adapting the university environment to modern challenges.

#### **4 Concluding Thoughts on the Role of Students upon the 50th Anniversary of the University of Maribor**

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University of Maribor, we can proudly state that the voice of students is heard and well represented. Student representation has, over the years, become a pillar of university governance, ensuring that the needs and interests of students are properly considered. Slovenia can also boast an exceptional system of student representation, which demonstrates excellent results, as students are actively involved in the management of the university and its faculties. The future brings challenges but also opportunities for further development, making it essential to continue encouraging the active involvement of all members of the community – professors, researchers, and students. Only through joint efforts can we create an environment where students not only receive education but also develop as responsible individuals prepared for the challenges of the future.

Student representation, with its role in the development of the university, remains crucial, not only representing student interests but also actively contributing to the creation of innovative and sustainable solutions for the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world. In doing so, we will create a university space where students have the opportunity for unlimited personal and academic development while actively shaping the society in which they will live and work. In the future, it will be even more important to maintain a creative and constructive dialogue that ensures the continued growth of the University of Maribor, not only as an educational institution but also as a space of progress, solidarity, and innovation. At the same time, we must not forget that successful development of the University of Maribor will also depend on adaptability to changes in the educational environment and the continuous search for new ways to integrate technology and innovation into the educational process. The university must remain open to new ideas and approaches that will provide students with access to the latest knowledge, research, and technologies. Only in this way will students be guaranteed a competitive advantage in the global labour market and the opportunity to develop into creative and skilled individuals ready to respond to future challenges. In this process, the cooperation of all members of the university

community will be particularly important, as only through joint efforts can long-term success and sustainable development be achieved.

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