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Student participation and the legitimacy of academic authority in university education: a habermasian analysis

Abstract

University education oriented towards autonomy operates within relationships in which students depend on assessment by those who hold academic authority. This article examines the conditions under which student participation can be democratically legitimate in the face of this asymmetry. It develops a theoretical essay based on argumentative reconstruction, structured around Habermasian communicative rationality. The analysis focuses on undergraduate education and distinguishes epistemic authority, institutional competence to decide, and responsibility for justifying decisions. It argues that the ability to reason does not ensure the conditions for contestation, since unequal resources, intellectual disqualification, and fear of retaliation may restrict participation. It concludes that lecturers' autonomy and students' autonomy can be reconciled when the exercise of specialised responsibility remains open to criticism and when raising questions does not undermine the academic recognition of those who ask them.

Keywords: habermas, academic authority, university education

Volume 10 Issue 5 - 2026

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Received: October 11, 2026 | **Published:** November 13, 2026

Introduction

University assessment raises a sociological problem because it connects judgements about knowledge with institutional power over students' academic trajectories. The opportunity to challenge these judgements depends on relations of authority, unequal resources, and the status accorded to those who speak. Examining participation in this setting brings the sociology of education into dialogue with questions of legitimacy and social inequality: under what conditions can an institution promote autonomy while retaining asymmetrical powers of assessment? This focus contributes to sociological debate by examining how everyday pedagogical relations organise access to justification and influence over decisions, without treating either formal participation or specialised authority as sufficient evidence of legitimacy.

A student may understand the criteria for a module, identify problems in their application, and decide not to question them. Silence may reflect agreement, but it may also arise from the perception that contestation threatens the relationship with the person who will continue to assess their learning. This possibility poses a difficulty for university education: the ability to formulate arguments does not ensure the institutional conditions for presenting them. Between intellectual autonomy and the public exercise of criticism lies a relationship of dependence that requires examination without presuming abuse in every assessment or legitimacy in every complaint.

This tension matters because undergraduate education may require precisely what the organisation of the pedagogical relationship can restrict: examining foundations, comparing interpretations, and defending independent positions. The problem does not lie in differences in knowledge between lecturers and students. Such differences are integral to teaching and justify specific responsibilities. The difficulty arises when specialised competence is invoked to close down questions about decisions, or when expressions of disagreement begin to influence the assessment of learning. How can autonomous subjects be educated within academic relationships that place them under others' power of assessment?

The question, therefore, is under what conditions student participation can be considered democratically legitimate in universities characterised by asymmetries of knowledge, assessment power, and academic authority. The argument is that the legitimacy of this authority depends on its relationship to knowledge and educational responsibilities, but also on conditions that allow students to question decisions, receive justifications, and request review without suffering arbitrary disadvantages. The aim is to examine the relationship between academic standards and contestability, avoiding the identification of democratisation with student satisfaction, voting on marks, or the dissolution of lecturers' responsibility.

The article develops a theoretical essay through the analysis and reconstruction of arguments. Its corpus comprises the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* by Habermas[1]; *Recognition without Ethics?* and *Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World* by Fraser;[2] *The Struggle for Recognition* by Honneth;[3] Benhabib's[4] response to critics of *Situating the Self*, consulted in Portuguese translation; and *The Right to Justification* by Forst.[5] These works were selected for their contributions to examining validity, conditions of participation, disrespect, and the demand for reasons. Reconstruction here means explicating the relationships and limits of arguments, without claiming to apply these authors' philosophical methods in full.

The discussion prioritises pedagogical decisions in undergraduate education, connecting the classroom to structures of representation and review. A hypothetical assessment controversy tests the consistency of the proposed criteria without presenting empirical research findings. The implications for universities are interpretations developed in this essay, rather than a theory of assessment attributed to the philosophers discussed. Nor is administrative uniformity across institutions assumed. The intended contribution is to distinguish epistemic authority, institutional competence, and responsibility for justification, showing why student autonomy requires conditions beyond an individual willingness to argue.

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Academic authority and the justification of pedagogical decisions

A lecturer may combine two forms of authority that need to be analytically distinguished. Epistemic authority derives from specialised knowledge and the ability to defend relevant judgements within a field. Institutional authority consists of the responsibilities that authorise a person to organise activities, assess performance, and record outcomes with academic consequences. The former provides reasons to trust a judgement; the latter confers competence to decide. Although they may support one another, they are not equivalent: holding an institutional position does not demonstrate the correctness of every decision, just as knowing a subject does not confer unlimited competence over other people's trajectories.

Within the pedagogical relationship, this distinction prevents two simplifications. On the one hand, participants' moral equality does not make all judgements about specialised knowledge equivalent. On the other, mastery of that knowledge does not render students' questions irrelevant. An objection may reveal inconsistency in the application of criteria without presupposing the intellectual superiority of the person raising it. Recognising students as interlocutors concerns their opportunity to examine reasons and consequences, while lecturers' responsibility includes distinguishing the quality of arguments and preserving educational objectives.

Habermas[1] distinguishes coordination oriented towards reaching understanding from coordination strategically directed towards success. Communicative agreement involves criticisable validity claims concerning the truth of assertions, normative rightness, and the truthfulness of subjective expressions. This framework distinguishes agreement supported by reasons from compliance produced by advantages, dependence, or threats. Observed acceptance does not establish that a participant recognised a decision as valid; what matters is how that acceptance arose and which opportunities to question it remained available.

Applying this criterion to undergraduate education requires recognising that assessment is not, in itself, a strategic practice. Judging learning may fulfil an educational responsibility and rest on reasons open to examination. The problem arises when the position of assessor is used to secure agreement on matters that should remain open to discussion. An intellectually grounded response cannot be devalued simply because it challenges the lecturer's preferred interpretation. Conversely, the freedom to disagree does not exempt students from demonstrating knowledge, responding to objections, or acknowledging shortcomings in their own work.

Lecturers' autonomy is grounded in the need to make specialised judgements that cannot be replaced by the class's immediate approval. It involves justifiable choices between pedagogical alternatives, including situations in which there is no single correct answer. This scope for judgement distinguishes discretion from arbitrariness. Discretion admits reasons, remains connected to learning objectives, and can be reconsidered in response to relevant objections. Arbitrariness arises when decisions depend on preferences without relevant grounds or are insulated from any demand for explanation. Autonomy does not amount to institutional immunity.

Making criteria public is necessary to make requirements predictable, but it does not establish their appropriateness. A criterion may be known from the outset yet assess aspects insufficiently related to the stated objectives. General formulations may also require interpretation during marking. Justifying an assessment involves showing how requirements relate to the knowledge addressed and how they were applied to the performance presented. The aim is not to eliminate all qualitative judgement through a formula, but to make the relationship between work, criteria, and outcome intelligible.

The power to assess also affects the conditions of dialogue. When the lecturer is both the recipient of criticism and responsible for subsequent assessments, a student may consider it risky to pursue an objection. Recognising this possibility does not require presuming retaliatory intent. Protection depends on procedures that separate the appraisal of performance from judgements about a student's willingness to challenge decisions, and that allow recourse to another body when direct dialogue fails to provide sufficient clarification. This possibility also protects lecturers against academic disagreements turning into personal disputes without shared criteria.

Not every issue can be debated indefinitely. The distinction between communicative action and argumentation concerning contested claims allows for routines whose continuation does not require complete renegotiation.[1] In universities, the academic calendar and the progression of a module require decisions at particular points. The task is to ensure that these limits are explained rather than converted into a general prohibition on review. A decision may need to remain in force while contested, provided that its grounds, the opportunities for appeal, and the consequences of any correction are identifiable.

This proposal connects intellectual rigour with institutional responsibility. Students should provide reasons for their objections, but they need not prove in advance that a lecturer was wrong in order to acquire the right to ask. Institutions, in turn, should not promise a review capable of satisfying every demand. Their commitment is to provide an appraisal that distinguishes errors, interpretative disagreements, and preferences incompatible with educational objectives. The democratic quality of the relationship depends on this capacity for differentiation, avoiding both unconditional deference and the negotiation of requirements in response to immediate pressure.

Inequalities and the institutional conditions of student participation

Formally recognising a channel for contestation does not guarantee equivalent conditions for using it. Knowing procedures, understanding the language of criteria, and having time to prepare a request may depend on unequally distributed resources. Within the argument developed here, these differences are possibilities relevant to institutional judgement, rather than empirical findings attributed indiscriminately to universities. The normative question is whether an institution can regard making a procedure available as sufficient when its organisation makes access disproportionately burdensome for certain students.

Fraser[6] shifts recognition away from the affirmation of identities towards the examination of institutionalised patterns that subordinate subjects and prevent them from participating as peers. Parity requires attention to material conditions and status relations. Fraser[6] explicitly addresses representation as a political dimension of justice, questioning decision-making procedures and the boundaries determining who may advance claims. These are related but distinct developments. For this essay, their interpretative implication is to examine participation in terms of access, the status accorded to interlocutors, and opportunities for influence.

Universities cannot eliminate these inequalities through internal decisions alone, but they can examine how their choices aggravate or mitigate them. Alternative ways of submitting claims and advance

Citation: Bettine M. Student participation and the legitimacy of academic authority in university education: a habermasian analysis. *Soc Int J.* 2026;10(5):154–157. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2026.10.00473

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information about agendas expand opportunities without automatically guaranteeing equal influence. The criterion is not to attribute the same experience to every absent person, but to prevent absence from being interpreted, without examination, as indifference or agreement.

Student representation must also be distinguished from the complete expression of students' interests. Representatives may receive divergent demands, possess incomplete information, or reproduce the positions of the most mobilised groups. Their legitimacy requires mechanisms for consultation and feedback, alongside opportunities for expression that do not depend exclusively on their intervention. The existence of representation does not remove the need to protect individual requests, particularly where personal information or assessment outcomes are concerned. Collective action should not become a prerequisite for every objection to receive consideration.

Honneth[3] relates patterns of recognition to the formation of positive relations to self, distinguishing love, rights, and social esteem. Experiences of disrespect can damage these relations and motivate conflict. The relevance of this approach to undergraduate education lies in showing that the willingness to participate has intersubjective conditions. Repeatedly dismissing questions or exposing difficulties in a humiliating way may undermine the confidence needed to defend a position, even when a person has arguments and access to a formal channel for expressing them.

This interpretation does not reduce teaching to preserving positive feelings. Criticism of a piece of work may be demanding and cause frustration without constituting disrespect. The task is to distinguish judgement of an academic achievement from the disqualification of its author as an interlocutor. Considering a conclusion insufficiently supported differs from treating a student's question as evidence that they do not belong at university. Academic recognition does not require attributing equal merit to every performance; it requires maintaining due regard for the person while examining differences in performance.

A tension remains between the formation of relations to self and the institutional status of participation. Individual confidence may survive unjust rules, while opening a procedure may not undo the effects of earlier humiliation. Bringing these frameworks into dialogue does not produce a unified theory: it preserves distinct questions about the relationships that shape subjects and the arrangements that organise their participation. An adequate institutional response may require correcting criteria and rebuilding the conditions of dialogue, without assuming that personal support can replace resources or that a formal rule can remedy every experience of disrespect.

Appraising a claim therefore requires considering the experience reported without turning it into conclusive evidence. A negative assessment may be experienced as unjust while remaining academically justified; a student may accept an outcome produced by inconsistent criteria. Institutions should examine reasons and procedures without requiring people to demonstrate suffering in order to be heard. Nor should the examination of an irregularity depend on a willingness to expose conflicts with lecturers publicly. Protecting privacy may enable participation by those who would not speak at an assembly.

The conditions for responding also concern lecturers' work. Clarifying criteria, providing feedback, and examining requests take time and organisation. A proposal for democratisation that assigns all these tasks to lecturers' personal availability undermines its own implementation. Reasonable obligations to respond need to be distinguished from unlimited expectations of support, with responsibilities distributed across the relevant institutional levels. Participation should not depend on exceptional availability from lecturers or students; its stability requires known procedures, adequate resources, and continuity beyond favourable personal relationships.

Assessment and the limits of shared decision making

The right to demand reasons makes it possible to examine authority without presuming that all positions are equivalent. Forst[5] associates justification with the criteria of reciprocity and generality: one cannot claim privileges denied to others, unilaterally attribute one's own interests to them, or arbitrarily exclude those affected. These criteria distinguish justifiability from actual agreement, allowing reasons to be assessed even where dissent persists. The question is not simply whether a student accepted a decision, but whether the reasons offered address relevant objections without treating the position of power itself as sufficient justification.

This requirement does not settle in advance how differences between students should be addressed. Responding to critics of her 1992 book, Benhabib[4] connects universal respect with attention to the histories and needs of concrete participants. Understanding these particularities depends on dialogue, since an observer cannot fully anticipate them. In university assessment, the proposal is that the application of common criteria should be examined in relation to the conditions under which activities are undertaken. This does not mean that every individual circumstance justifies changing an outcome, but that its relevance needs to be assessed.

Consider an entirely hypothetical controversy constructed for analytical purposes. In an undergraduate module, a lecturer assigns part of the mark to a seminar, with announced criteria of conceptual consistency, engagement with the literature, and participation in discussion. After the results are released, students question the meaning attributed to participation and the value placed on interpretations close to the lecturer's position. The lecturer maintains that the assessment concerned mastery of content and the quality of contributions. This situation does not describe a university under investigation: it allows examination of the difference between disagreement with a mark and an objection to the structure or application of the judgement.

Announcing criteria in advance provides a reference point but does not resolve the controversy. Participation may have been interpreted as frequency of contributions, ability to answer questions, or contribution to the discussion. The first task would be to clarify which of these dimensions was assessed and how it relates to the module's objectives. Subsequent clarification may explain the meaning of a requirement, but it should not retrospectively introduce an obligation that was previously unknown. The problem concerns the difference between clarifying a criterion and changing what students were required to do.

Regarding theoretical agreement, understanding would need to be distinguished from endorsement. Lecturers may require a perspective to be accurately reconstructed, even by those who disagree with it. They may also find an objection inadequate if it ignores relevant concepts or evidence. However, a reasoned criticism should not lose value merely because it challenges their position. Justifying the outcome would require identifying specific shortcomings in the work and demonstrating the relevance of the criteria used.

Students, in turn, would not be exempt from justifying their challenge. Comparisons between marks or the effort invested may raise questions, but neither establishes inconsistency on its own.

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What matters is specifying how the assessment allegedly failed to recognise performance or applied different requirements. The duty to substantiate an objection corresponds to the duty to make the judgement intelligible.

Suppose that some students prefer to raise the issue through a representative, fearing consequences for their remaining assessments. Mediation may reduce exposure but may also overlook differences between claims. A general criticism of the participation criterion does not necessarily resolve an individual request for a mark to be reviewed. Collective discussion of the procedure should therefore be distinguished from confidential examination of its application. Choosing one route should not rule out the other or require representatives to access personal information unnecessary to their role.

Attention to particular circumstances arises when students report specific difficulties in contributing orally within the allotted time. Lecturers need to examine whether oral competence is part of the learning objective or whether the format was simply a means chosen to assess knowledge. In the former case, removing this dimension altogether may compromise the activity; in the latter, another approach may preserve the intellectual requirement. This distinction prevents every adjustment from being treated as a reduction in rigour or every request from being automatically accepted. The point is to justify the relationship between academic purpose and the conditions for completing the activity.

An adjustment may nevertheless prompt objections from other students concerning equal treatment. A response requires criteria applicable to comparable situations and a proportionate appraisal of relevant differences. It does not require full disclosure of the individual circumstances informing the decision. Publicity of the principle and confidentiality of personal information can coexist. Generality of justification concerns the possibility of defending the distinction before those affected, rather than an obligation to expose every personal trajectory to the class's curiosity. Equality requires reasons both for differentiation and for maintaining common requirements.

The conflict reveals a limit to combining these theoretical frameworks. Particular experience may shift the understanding of a problem, while the requirement of reciprocity prevents a solution from becoming an unjustifiable privilege. Analysis of the conditions of participation, in turn, asks who can secure recognition of these circumstances. No procedure eliminates every tension through the simple application of concepts. Institutions need to interpret claims and answer for their choices, acknowledging that protecting privacy, maintaining assessment consistency, and enabling scrutiny may require different arrangements according to the issue under discussion.

Disagreement may persist after the reasons have been considered. A student may continue to regard a requirement as excessive while the lecturer maintains its relevance. The institutional decision would need to state what was examined, address the central points, and clarify the possibilities and limits of further review. Correcting an individual outcome, changing a future procedure, and acknowledging the legitimacy of a criticism are distinct consequences. Not every well-founded objection entails the same remedy, just as upholding a mark does not demonstrate that the procedure is free of problems. Justification should make these differences intelligible.

The module continues while the review is under way. This interval requires attention so that contestation does not become an additional academic burden or indefinitely suspend lecturers' work. Known deadlines, communication about progress, and continued participation in subsequent activities help delimit responsibilities. It is also necessary to consider how any correction will address consequences already produced by the initial outcome. A procedure that acknowledges error but lacks the means to address its effects provides an incomplete review. The possibility of remedy is part of the institutional quality of the response.

Conclusion

The legitimacy of academic authority depends on a relationship between knowledge, decision making, and responsibility towards those affected. The analysis distinguished the trust warranted by specialised competence from the institutional responsibility to assess, showing that neither makes the provision of reasons dispensable. Student autonomy can be restricted even where the ability to argue is present, because academic dependence affects the conditions for expressing a position. Education oriented towards criticism must therefore also examine the procedures through which institutions receive and consider challenges to their own decisions.

The contribution of this essay is to connect participation to three related requirements: conditions of access, effective consideration of objections, and the possibility of correction. The first prevents the right to ask questions from remaining dependent on unequally available resources. The second requires responses to address the argument presented, preserving recognition of the student as an interlocutor. The third distinguishes a procedure capable of revising decisions from a hearing without consequences. These requirements do not transfer the power to assess entirely to students, but make its exercise accountable and contestable.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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Citation: Bettine M. Student participation and the legitimacy of academic authority in university education: a habermasian analysis. *Soc Int J*. 2026;10(5):154–157. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2026.10.00473