The role of the university in the promotion of democracy and human rights: a study of students at the University of Patras

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Abstract: **In modern societies, democratic citizens are those whose attitude towards institutions determines the degree of democratisation of society and promotes a democratic way of life. In other words, the promotion of democratic values and principles as well as fundamental rights is a basic obligation of citizens in order to further promote and strengthen democracy. On this basis, the role of the university is crucial. At university, people are more mature and able to understand their place and role in a democratic society. The university has a duty to promote democratic attitudes and practises among young people that lay the foundations for a society that upholds democratic principles and protects human rights. In this sense, the Council of Europe contributes to strengthening the democratic rights of students by pursuing an educational policy that, in co-operation with university administrations, shapes and cultivates the democratic ideal and promotes human rights. The main aim of our research is to investigate the attitudes of students at the University of Patras towards whether the university itself promotes democratic rights and values in terms of knowledge and practise. To this end, we used a questionnaire as a methodological tool in this study, which was administered to 165 students at the University of Patras in order to analyse their attitudes according to the Council of Europe's model of democratic cultural competences. According to the results of our research, we concluded that there is a clear problem in students' understanding of the concepts of democratic rights and values. The majority of students are looking for opportunities to participate more in the decision-making process. They show a positive attitude towards taking responsibility and actively engaging in academic processes where possible.**

Keywords: **University, Democracy, Human rights, Council of Europe.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy today faces a multitude of challenges, including political, social, economic, technological and institutional [4]. In particular, issues and problems such as citizens' apathy towards participation in public life, populist tendencies of political parties, ideological divisions, the undermining of the independence of the judiciary as well as difficulties in the integration and acceptance of minorities, increasing migration flows and the fight against social and economic inequalities make democracy fragile [35]. In addition, collective decision-making within the European Union faces the challenge of different perceptions and conditions in the Member States themselves, while citizens often do not feel that they are actively involved in the decision-making of the EU institutions [17], [22].

On the other hand, economic inequalities, especially between industrialised and developing countries, but also within the strongest countries, have led to the impoverishment of large population groups and thus to the violation of their fundamental rights. In concrete terms, this means that full respect for human rights gives all citizens the opportunity to live freely and with dignity and thus to develop their full potential in order to achieve the desired self-realisation and thus personal

happiness [39]. That is, the respect for human rights enables an orderly and peaceful social coexistence in which concepts such as personal freedom and democracy find their fullest expression. Every state therefore reaches its maximum potential when the willing co-operation and support of its citizens is guaranteed. Without the painful reality of inequality and injustice, every citizen feels a stronger desire to contribute to the collective aspirations of their country, recognising that the benefits of these achievements will accrue equally to all fellow citizens and not just the powerful and privileged. The elimination of inequalities and exploitation at the international level would be a real opportunity for peace between peoples, as each nation would be fully respected without feeling the need to constantly fight to preserve its territorial and economic rights [34].

In this context, the democratisation of education, especially higher education, is an important way to educate young people, as the democratic citizens of tomorrow, about their rights and duties, which in turn are an important prerequisite for the preservation and stabilisation of democracy [6]. This means that education must be even more strongly focussed on the cultivation of democratic principles and values and respect for human rights. In higher education in particular, a key factor in achieving this goal is the existence of democratic leadership, which could further strengthen the promotion of students' democratic rights through the cultivation and implementation of democratic processes and practises, as well as co-operation with European institutions such as the Council of Europe [10][33].

II. THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

As we know, the term democracy comes from the Greek. It is derived from the noun *δήμος* (dimos), which means people, mass of people or all citizens, and the verb *κρατείν* (kratin), which means to rule, to exercise power. In other words, democracy means the sovereignty or power of the people, popular sovereignty or the sovereignty of the many. In a democracy, the sovereignty of the people is understood as a legitimate form of sovereignty, i.e. a way of exercising power that is accepted as legitimate. This power has three characteristics: a) it emanates from the people, b) it is exercised by the community or its elected representatives and c) it serves the interests of the people [48]. Democracy is based on collective processes and decisions as well as collective actions that shape situations and advance the public sphere [2].

Most contemporary democracies differ from their ancient Greek counterparts in their representative system and the presence of intermediary organisations that mediate between the community and political power, such as parties and organised interests. They also differ in terms of the larger percentage of the adult population with the right to political participation, its strict definition by the constitution and laws, and its application in both small and large states. In both older and modern democracies, however, there is a common requirement that state power is bound by the rule of political equality of citizens and is based on the will of the citizens or at least a large part of them [43].

Democracy, which presupposes and demands a pluralistic society in which different power groups compete peacefully for overall decision-making, is a system in which most decisions are ultimately made through agreements between different groups. Democracy gives life to a society of contracts based on the respect and acceptance of the principle pacta sunt servanda, i.e. agreements must be honoured [8]. This means that a democracy, in order to survive and strengthen itself, must develop the highest possible level of trust between citizens and therefore prohibit the strategy of deception and fraud as much as possible. For example, the mass media distracts the adult public from the real social problems, while education leaves students uneducated in areas such as maths, economics, law, philosophy and history [26].

According to [7], democracy is characterised by a set of rules that define who is authorised to make collective decisions and by what procedures. For a decision made by individuals to be recognised as a collective decision, it must be made on the basis of written or common law rules that specify which individuals are authorised to make decisions that are binding on all members of the group and according to which procedures. With regard to the decision-making process, he emphasises that the fundamental rule of democracy is majority rule, according to which decisions that are approved by at least a majority of those authorised to make decisions are considered collective and therefore binding on all citizens. Decisions that are approved by at least the majority of those authorised to make decisions. In this case, those who have to make a decision or choose those who are to make a decision must be presented with real alternatives from which they can choose.

Of course, this cannot be done without guaranteeing the right to freedom, assembly, expression of opinion, etc. to the citizens who are called upon to decide. In other words, the rights on which the emergence of the liberal state and the construction of the theory of the state, that not only exercises power according to the law, but does so within the limits resulting from the constitutional guarantee of individual rights, are based. In other words, human rights are a necessary condition for the proper and effective functioning of the procedural mechanisms that characterise a democratic regime [1],

[52]. It can be concluded from this that the liberal state is not only the historical but also the legal precondition for the democratic state. This means that the liberal state and the democratic state are interdependent in two ways: in the direction from liberalism to democracy, in the sense that freedoms are necessary for the proper exercise of democratic power, and in the opposite direction, from democracy to liberalism, in the sense that democratic power is necessary to ensure the existence and preservation of fundamental freedoms [8].

III. HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

Many in modern democracies believe that human rights are the moral foundation of modern democratic societies. They are the rights that every human being has by nature, regardless of ethnicity, skin colour, religion, gender, national or social origin or other characteristics. They form the basis of the rule of law and establish the democratic values of any well-governed state whose primary duty is to respect and protect human dignity [38].

Human rights are directly related to modern natural law, which enshrines the equal moral worth of all human beings without exception and the freedom of individuals to act according to their free will. In other words, with the adoption of the ideas of modern natural law about the rights inherent in human nature (equality, freedom and property) and the recognition of freedom of will and thought – through the Enlightenment – the top-down form of society was brought to an end. Basically, society entered the age of the global citizen, i.e. the age of democracy [1]. In essence, the thinkers of the Enlightenment not only invented the language of human rights, but also took up issues that still preoccupy public discourse on human rights today. Today, as then, we see the state as the guardian of fundamental rights and at the same time as the 'enemy' against whom human rights must be protected. Both in the Enlightenment period and today, this dual belief in the nation state and human rights has contributed to the maintenance of a double moral standard that continues to subordinate the various obligations arising from human rights to the 'national interest' [31].

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and other subsequent international declarations or conventions, such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, established the principles on the basis of which human rights are inseparable from human existence, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. Fundamental rights, as the term is now understood, are divided according to the classical typology into a) individual rights, such as the right to life, equality, liberty, freedom of thought, conscience and opinion, b) political rights, which guarantee equal participation in civic and political life, the right to vote and stand for election and equality before the law, and c) social rights. In some cases, such as in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the classical typology of human rights [1] is deviated from due to the emergence of new rights as a result of social developments, but also for political or ideological reasons. For example, the need to strengthen democracy with regard to the legitimacy of the political decisions of the European Union's committees has led to the recognition of a new category of democratic rights [3]. It is worth noting that the concept of fundamental rights is inextricably linked to the concept of human rights, from which it derives.

More specifically, individual rights were historically recognised as public freedoms, identified with the liberal state itself and its characteristic feature, the constitution, and eventually incorporated into the legal order of Western liberal democracies. As a consequence, political rights concern the citizen as a member of a democratic state and not the individual as a species. In other words, they derive from the establishment of political society itself, through the social contract and its objectives, which are precisely to guarantee human rights. However, this interdependence of human rights and political rights does not mean that the two concepts are identical. In liberal democracies, political rights are not an end in themselves, but a means of guaranteeing the natural rights (security, freedom, property) of the individual and protecting them from the arbitrariness of power. Finally, through universal suffrage and the pressure it exerts within the framework of parliamentary democracy, political rights have led to the establishment of social rights and to support for the demand of the weaker classes for social justice [31], [48].

IV. UNIVERSITY, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The university plays a key role in the development and maintenance of democratic culture, without which democratic societies cannot function. At the same time, equal opportunities in this field contribute to social cohesion and thus to the sustainable development of modern societies by preparing students for the democratic citizens of tomorrow through teaching, learning and research and by creating a progressive, comprehensive and diverse knowledge base. In addition, one of the university's main objectives is to develop critical thinking. In other words, students should be able to decide on matters of general interest free and uninfluenced by past fears and stereotypes [30]. Furthermore, the Recommendation [60] of the

Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on public responsibility for higher education and research emphasises the need to strengthen human rights and fundamental freedoms in the university environment in order to prepare students for the role of responsible citizens of tomorrow, living and acting freely, with understanding, respect and equality.

On this basis, the Council of Europe, in a survey of students at European universities, emphasised the need for students to develop their democratic social ethos, especially through the learning and dissemination of values related to human rights, such as justice, equality, impartiality, respect for others, social responsibility, tolerance of diversity, etc. In addition, the same survey emphasised the need for students to develop skills such as autonomy in learning, analysis and critical thinking, empathy, flexibility, cooperation and communication [14]. These findings are in line with the fundamental purpose that universities serve and should prioritise in modern democratic societies. This is despite the fact that the teaching of human rights and democratic values and principles in general alone would not be sufficient to shape a democratic ethic in the university environment, especially among students [1]. Furthermore, research by [27] has shown that the main democratic values that students consider very important include, in order of importance, responsibility and respect, the use of dialogue as a strategy for conflict resolution, a preference for a good atmosphere in their groups, and the ability to recognise good arguments regardless of whether others' opinions differ from their own [58]. On the other hand, according to [29], the university faces a lack of cohesion as university structures are dominated by a liberalism and a Euro-American imperialism that includes more subtle forms of marginalisation. In addition, the emergence of globalisation and interculturality in recent decades complicates the framework of shared values and makes it difficult to deal with very diverse groups, while conceptual and interpretative contradictions often arise, leading to conflict [55].

The transformation of the university into an autonomous democratic space requires the promotion of students' democratic rights through a) access to the acquisition and application of knowledge, attitudes and skills obtained in a democratic manner, b) the promotion of both individual and collective values, c) the development of a sense of independence and self-confidence in social life, and e) the strengthening of political autonomy through active participation in public life. Through this democratic framework of university governance, the following are achieved: the involvement of students in public life and decision-making, the improvement of interpersonal and social relationships and psychological resilience, which are key components for the cultivation and development of a democratic culture [18], [25].

V.   THE MODEL OF DEMOCRATIC CULTURE COMPETENCES ACCORDING TO THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

In line with the Council of Europe's principles on democracy education and human rights education, this chapter presents the model of competences for the development of a democratic culture [12]. In view of the fact that democracy cannot exist without democratic institutions and laws if these cannot function in a society that has developed a democratic culture, the Council of Europe has introduced the competences model to better promote democratic rights. In this model, the competences that characterise citizens are divided into four categories:

A. Values: Values are very important in the competences model as they enable individuals to participate in the creation and maintenance of a democratic culture. They serve as guiding principles and help individuals to understand how they should behave in the interests of the common good. They promote collective decision-making, the exchange of views, attitudes and behaviours and constructive dialogue. Human dignity, which states that everyone should be treated with equal respect [9], plays an important role in the category of values. This category also includes cultural diversity, which helps to ensure that people encourage and interact with each other regardless of cultural differences [3].

B. Attitudes: An attitude is a state of mind that a person adopts towards someone or something. Attitudes usually consist of four elements: Opinion, feeling, evaluation (either positive or negative) and the way the person behaves. Firstly, the attitude of "respect" is an attitude towards someone or something that is evaluated as important and positive. One type of "respect" attitude that is particularly important in the context of the model we are analysing is respect for other people who have a different cultural background, opinions and beliefs. This respect is based on recognising the dignity and equality of all people. In addition, the attitude of "responsibility" is an attitude that an individual has towards their actions to which they are committed in a certain way. Responsibility requires courage to make decisions on important issues and a willingness to evaluate and judge oneself [12].

C. Skills: A skill is a person's ability to achieve a specific result by using and applying knowledge to achieve a goal. Firstly, analytical and critical thinking skills form a large and complex set of interrelated skills. Analytical thinking is the ability to

observe, investigate and interpret a subject in order to find suitable ideas/solutions. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is the ability to evaluate the reliability of available information and make decisions based on experience. Critical thinking also helps to develop and process alternative options and possibilities. Added to this are the skills of listening and observing, which enable individuals to understand the opinions and behaviour of their interlocutors. Another important skill is conflict resolution, which helps in dealing with and managing conflict as well as reducing aggression and negativity and creating a neutral environment in which people feel free to express their opinions [11].

D. Knowledge and critical understanding: Knowledge is a set of information that a person possesses. The term critical understanding is used to emphasise the need to understand and appreciate certain concepts related to democratic processes. There are different forms of knowledge and critical understanding, such as self-awareness and self-understanding. It is very important that individuals are aware of their emotions and set their own boundaries based on their abilities and experiences. It is also very important that both the language and communication between people is understood, as there are many different aspects between them [12]. Thus, the purpose of this model is to describe the skills that individuals need to acquire in order to actively participate in society and claim their democratic rights [21].

VI.   COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND UNIVERSITIES

Recognising the crucial role that higher education plays in promoting human rights and the principles and values of democracy and the rule of law, it seeks, in cooperation with university administrations, to ensure the effective integration of these principles into the academic sphere. Academic freedom, the institutional autonomy of universities, education for citizenship and human rights, and the cultural and social integration of members of the university community are the fundamental values that the Council of Europe and university administrations wish to jointly promote and strengthen in the academic field [48]. However, the increasing pressure on universities to restrict academic freedom has led the Council of Europe to enter into wider co-operation with other European bodies such as the European Commission and the Bologna Monitoring Group in order to protect and strengthen the existing European legal framework with the active contribution of the academic community at both European and national levels. In addition, these synergies indirectly promote and strengthen research and academic initiatives related to the promotion of democratic rights at universities [36].

The Council of Europe, through active co-operation with member states, shapes educational policies and practises that strengthen the participation of students in decisions that affect them. Strengthening civic participation and protecting human rights are two important priorities. In the first direction, the Council of Europe promotes the participation of citizens in decision-making processes through consultations and online discussion platforms. In the second direction, the Council of Europe strives for the effective implementation of democratic practises in the university environment through programmes to promote human rights and democratic principles and values [33]. Through these programmes, the Council of Europe is developing an approach that emphasises the importance of participation, awareness and conscious action in the university environment and creates a strong and dynamic higher education system based on the principles of participation, equity and respect for human rights [57]. One step in this direction is, for example, the establishment of an education department with a four-year programme of activities. Specifically, the Council of Europe's Education Department, in close co-operation with the Steering Committee on Education (CDEDU), assists member states in developing and strengthening their policies, legislation and practises relating to the promotion of democratic principles and values in education, and in particular in higher education, taking into account the legal and policy instruments, guidelines, tools and resources at its disposal [15].

With this in mind, the Council of Europe has created the Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED), which also covers the tertiary education sector. This platform is a space for European dialogue between member states and their education departments, through which the rules and materials developed by the Council of Europe to strengthen democratic culture in European education [20].

VII.   AIM(S) AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of our research is to investigate the attitudes of the students of the University of Patras towards whether the university itself promotes democratic rights and values in terms of knowledge and practises. By analysing students' attitudes towards the promotion of democratic rights and values at the university, we examine the extent to which the capacity for democratic culture is promoted according to the Council of Europe model. Our interest, therefore, is essentially focussed

on investigating and exploring whether and to what extent the university promotes democratic rights and values among students.

Next, we will attempt to formulate the research questions that have emerged from the preceding literature review and theoretical analysis. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

a. What are the attitudes of students at the University of Patras towards the promotion of democratic values at the university?

b. What are the students' attitudes towards the knowledge and promotion of human rights at the university?

VIII.   RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, we used a survey with a questionnaire as the main instrument. The questionnaire was based on the Council of Europe's model of democratic culture. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire contains: a) eight (8) statements on civic awareness/engagement and responsibility. More specifically, these eight statements were derived from the translation and adaptation of the Civic Engagement Scale (CES), which was developed for students to assess their political engagement and responsibility and how it changes through the educational process [19], to the data and needs of our study. It was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1=agree strongly disagree to 7=agree strongly agree), b) seven (7) questions on intolerance of ambiguity. The seven (7) questions were derived from the translation and adaptation of the Short Ambiguity Intolerance Scale (SAIS-7) by the Serbian team of [61] to the data and needs of our study. It was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree), and c) eight (8) statements about acceptance, appreciation and respect for diversity. Specifically, three statements measure acceptance of diversity, two (2) statements measure respect for diversity and three (3) statements measure appreciation of diversity. The questions were derived from relevant international research on measuring acceptance at national and transnational levels [28] and were translated and adapted to the data and needs of our study. They were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree).

The information collected from the students' questionnaires was entered into a database using SPSS 27 statistical software. Finally, the reliability of the question scales was tested using the Cronbach's alpha reliability index.

IX.   SAMPLING

Students from the University of Patras enrolled in different years of study participated in this study. A total of 165 students (N=165) participated in the survey, which was conducted during the academic year 2024-2025. A random sample was used for operational reasons. In addition, student participation in the survey was voluntary. The study was conducted in a manner that ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed via the online platform with an accompanying letter about the purpose of the study, the benefits of their participation and the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. They were also informed about their consent to participate and their right to communicate directly with the researchers. The questionnaire was attached to the letter in electronic form.

X.   DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A. The identification of the sample

The majority of students (N=165) are women (67.27%), while men make up 32.73%. Thirty per cent of the students are enrolled in a science major. The majority of students have not taken any courses related to democracy or human rights (67.19%).

B. Regarding the Civic Engagement Scale (CES)

The examination of the internal consistency of the questions on the civic awareness and responsibility scale revealed a high Cronbach's alpha coefficient (a=0.856). The following table (Table 1) shows that the students have a medium to high levels of civic awareness and responsibility. More specifically, they scored high on questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, while they scored moderately high on their responsibility to help the poor and needy. Their awareness of issues affecting their community is also particularly high.

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TABLE 1 : RESULTS OF THE SURVEY ON STUDENTS' CIVIC AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY (CES)

Questions	Average
1. I feel responsible for my community.	5.67
2. I believe that I should make a difference in my community.	4.87
3. I believe I have a responsibility to help the poor and hungry.	5.05
4. I have an obligation to serve my community.	5.19
5. I believe that all citizens have obligations to their community.	5.87
6. I believe it is important to be informed about issues that concern my community.	6.03
7. I believe it is important to volunteer.	5.79
8. I believe it is important to support charitable causes.	5.54
Cronbach's Alpha	0.856

C. Regarding the Short Ambiguity Intolerance Scale (SAIS-7)

Checking the internal consistency of the questions on the scale of intolerance of ambiguity revealed a high Cronbach's alpha value (a=0.834). The table below (Table 2) shows that students have a moderate intolerance of ambiguity. In particular, the agreement rates for 6 out of 7 questions are moderate. However, it can be observed that students indicate the highest levels of agreement for their preference for stories with heroes who behave consistently.

TABLE 2 : RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION OF STUDENTS' INTOLERANCE TO AMBIGUITY (SAIS-7)

Questions	Average
1. I don't like questions that have more than one correct answer.	2.32
2. I don't like poems that contain contradictions.	2.25
3. I like stories with heroes who behave consistently.	3.34
4. I don't like vague and impressionistic images.	2.56
5. I don't like dealing with a problem if there is no possibility of finding a specific solution.	2.89
6. I get annoyed when I hear someone who can't make up their mind.	2.54
7. I hate situations where a problem cannot be solved immediately.	2.76
8. I don't like questions that have more than one correct answer.	2.13
Cronbach's Alpha	0.834

D. According to the Acceptance, Appreciation and Respect for Diversity Scale (OLS)

The examination of the internal consistency of the questions on acceptance, appreciation and respect for diversity according to the individual scales resulted in a satisfactory value of the Cronbach's alpha index (a=0.701 to a=0.777). The table below (Table 3) shows that students appear to have a high levels of acceptance and respect, while their appreciation of diversity was rated as moderate to high.

TABLE 3: RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION OF STUDENTS' ACCEPTANCE, APPRECIATION AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY (OLS)

	Questions	Average	Cronbach's Alpha
Acceptance	1. All people have the right to live as they wish.	4.53	0.701
	2. It is important for people to choose how they live freely.	4.65	
	3. All people can live as they wish, as long as they do not harm others.	4.76	
Respect	4. I respect other people's beliefs and opinions.	3.99	0.765
	5. I respect other people's beliefs and opinions, even when I disagree with them.	4.21	
Appreciation	6. I enjoy interacting with people who are different from me.	3.05	0.777
	7. I like to interact with people who challenge me to think about the world differently.	4.32	
	8. Society benefits from diversity and difference.	4.23	

XI. DISCUSSION

This study examined the attitudes of students at the University of Patras towards the promotion of democratic culture and rights in the university environment according to the Council of Europe's model of democratic cultural competences. By examining three values, namely "civic awareness and responsibility", "intolerance of ambiguity" and "tolerance of diversity", the following conclusions were drawn:

A. Civic awareness and responsibility: Students' civic behaviour can predict their future participation in democratic processes [49], play an important role in shaping university culture, making it more inclusive and social [37], but also promote lifelong political responsibility and leadership [53]. On this basis, it appears that the majority of students surveyed are in favour of such an attitude towards issues of democracy and human rights at departmental level. In other words, students are willing to actively participate in volunteering and cultivate a democratic culture. However, they seem reluctant to take on leadership initiatives and responsibilities. Students' responses indicate that they call for a sharing of responsibility and greater involvement in decision-making, especially on issues of democracy and human rights. Similarly, numerous studies emphasise the importance of individual civic virtues coupled with well-structured university governance in ensuring the stability of democratic governance at the university and strengthening the democratic culture based on the value and promotion of human rights [41].

B. In relation to intolerance of ambiguity: Since ambiguity tolerance refers to a person's ability to deal with unfamiliar and complex situations that lead to ambiguous situations in life [23], the moderate score among the students surveyed could possibly mean that a) they tend to interpret or perceive an ambiguous situation as a source of threat, leading them to react inappropriately to the situation, try to avoid it, and experience it with more anxiety and difficulty [44], and b) that they have a need for safety and avoid complex social or moral issues, which can often lead to black and white thinking [50], [56]. This is confirmed by a study by [42], which was conducted on 158 students and showed that a low tolerance for ambiguity leads to increased academic stress. In addition, moderate achievement scores are associated with a limited willingness of the students surveyed to engage in constructive dialogue, accept ideological and cultural diversity and think critically [51], argue democratically [54] and defend positions related to democracy and human rights [5].

C. Regarding tolerance of diversity: Considering that the dimension "appreciation of diversity" was rated low and the fact that, according to [24], the university is the first opportunity for peers from different racial and cultural backgrounds to interact with each other and that programmes are implemented to promote cultural diversity, it seems that the students who participated in the survey do not share this view, even if studying in such an educational environment promotes tolerance towards diversity [27]. In other words, students seem to have a negative attitude towards interacting with other students who have a different cultural background. This may be due to a limited level of recognition and acceptance of diversity as well as a lower level of empathy and appreciation on the part of students, which ultimately manifests itself in the form of difficulties in accepting other identities and opinions. Such attitudes usually arise when one has limited exposure to multicultural conditions, which can lead to a superficial attitude of acceptance of diversity, while it can also be a transitional phase in the development of one's identity [59]. At this point, it should be noted that, according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority, although the number of international students at Greek universities is increasing by about 2.8%, the levels of multiculturalism is still lower than in other countries, so students' experiences are probably relatively moderate. On the other hand, the high rating for 'tolerance of diversity' overall indicates that the University of Patras has the necessary mechanisms in place to promote critical thinking [40], prepare students for roles as future democratic citizens in multicultural societies [47] and foster an inclusive learning environment, as well as reduce discrimination and marginalisation, which improves the psychological well-being and academic success of all students [16].

XII. CONCLUSION

By examining the results of our research and based on the answers to our research questions, this paper sheds light on the important issue of the democratic functioning of Greek higher education. Research has shown that students with a good tolerance for diversity, combined with moderate to high levels of civic behaviour, strive to cultivate and strengthen the democratic culture in their department while improving their intercultural skills. To achieve this, university management must of course promote democratic values and the democratic rights of students in practise through constructive dialogue. In this way, according to the Council of Europe, a democratic mentality is created and cultivated — a mentality that is interwoven with justice, equality, participation and social responsibility. Furthermore, the available findings of our research

indicate that departments, especially those that teach more humanistic skills or include courses related to democracy and/or human rights in their curriculum, can positively contribute to the development and strengthening of democratic culture in the university environment [13], [15]. In addition, the development mainly voluntary social activities allows students to stay informed about human rights issues. increased awareness and knowledge of social problems that violate human rights can change students' attitudes towards human rights and make them pay more attention to community engagement to create a better society [46].

Despite the Council of Europe's philosophy of "unity in diversity", discrimination based on national origin is still widespread, especially in the context of the refugee and asylum seeker crisis [32]. Civic education and courses on democracy and human rights in higher education provide a focused shaping of students' political views, while their involvement in democratic practises improves individual tolerance and promotes active citizenship behaviour, thus creating positive interactions with democracy and human rights [45].

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