

## **Political imagination as political agency – exploring students’ utopias about the future of food assistance**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores political imagination as a form of political agency among higher education students. While student political engagement is often framed through conventional, institutionalised forms of participation, this study focuses on more nuanced and everyday ways in which students relate to politics. Drawing on workshop discussions about the future of food assistance in Finland (N=86), the paper examines how political imagination takes shape in students’ discussions. Conceptually, it builds on the idea of utopia as method and analyses political imagination through the lens of (de)politicization. The analysis identifies three interrelated elements—constraints, cracks, and conditions—that shape students’ imaginative practices. Political imagination emerges as a fragile but meaningful form of agency, visible in students’ critique of the present and envisioning of alternatives. The paper considers the potential of political imagination and utopian thought to support nuanced and everyday forms of political engagement among higher education students.

### **Full paper**

#### **Background**

Higher education (HE) has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal logics of marketisation and employability, which positions it as a driver of economic growth and a producer of ‘worker-citizens’. These developments have raised concerns about the narrowing role of HE in democratic societies, particularly its capacity to foster critical thinking and nurture democratic citizenship. In response to this, an emerging body of research has emphasised the importance of teaching political imagination and ‘critical hope’ in higher education (e.g., Salmenniemi et al., 2024; Schwittay, 2025). While this scholarship has focused primarily on

pedagogical approaches to future-oriented thinking, less attention has been paid to political imagination as a form of political agency.

This paper explores HE students' political imagination as a form of political agency through their everyday relationships with politics (Hamidi, 2023). These include the often-overlooked more unconventional, nuanced, and everyday ways in which students might act politically. While much of the literature on students' political engagement focuses on traditional and institutionalised forms of participation, this study draws on a broad understanding of politics – one that moves beyond formal institutions and electoral processes, shaped by social relations, lived experiences, and everyday contexts, and practiced, for example, through thinking and speaking politically (Perrin, 2006).

### **Conceptual framework**

Conceptually, this paper draws on the ideas of political imagination and *utopia as method*. Political imagination can be broadly described as 'a way of transcending political reality, and thus challenging conformity' (Duncombe & Harrebye, 2021). It is an open, collective and emancipatory practice that is inherently intersubjective, affective and social (Salmenniemi et al., 2024). In this study, utopias are understood as tools for political imagination (Eskelinen et al., 2020). Utopia is not seen as blueprint for ideal or perfect societies, often associated with static or totalising visions. Instead, drawing on Levitas (2013), utopia is understood as a method for challenging existing societal conditions and enabling the envisioning of alternative futures, pointing the way toward social change (Eskelinen et al., 2020).

We analyse utopias and political imagination particularly through the concept of (de)politicization. Politicization refers to the opening up of political space and the act of making something political (Luhtakallio, 2012), whereby social relations and phenomena are questioned and their normative dimensions are brought to the fore (Meriluoto, 2021). Depoliticization, in turn, keeps these normative dimensions hidden, framing phenomena, for example, as technical or administrative issues (ibid.).

### **Data and methods**

The research material consists of small group discussions from seven workshops we organised in 2024 on the future of food assistance in Finland. Participants included HE students from the social sciences, education, and social and health care disciplines (N=86). We chose to focus on students from these disciplines because they are likely to encounter issues related to food assistance in their professional lives after graduation. Food assistance closely relates to multiple areas of public policy and welfare politics, and one that is both politicised and depoliticised in public discourse (Tikka, 2019), making it a

relevant case through which to explore political imagination. In the small-group discussions, facilitated by the researchers, students explored the current state of food assistance and reflected on possible alternative futures using provided materials and guiding questions. A total of 21 small-group discussions and 7 collective unpacking discussions were recorded and analysed.

## **Findings**

The analysis explores how three elements – *constraints*, *cracks*, and *conditions* – *shape the workings of students' political imagination*. Constraints refer to individual and collective factors that, in themselves, act as barriers to imagination. Cracks reveal conversational trajectories in which processes of politicization begin to take shape. They expose ruptures in the current system through which utopian lines of thought can emerge—moments when alternative futures become visible or thinkable. Conditions, in turn, relate to the actual content of the discussions, which can limit utopian thinking and determine how far political imagination can go. The dynamics between the three elements highlight how political imagination is not a linear process, but a cyclical movement between the constraints, cracks and conditions.

Political imagination, in this sense, may offer a fragile yet meaningful mode of agency. It becomes tentatively visible in how students critique the status quo, formulate alternative futures, and reposition themselves in relation to the political. The movement between constraints, cracks, and conditions helps to illuminate how 'politics' can emerge from the process of collective imagination, and how forms of agency may take shape in collective and situated ways. Taken together, the paper considers the potential of political imagination and utopian thought to support nuanced and everyday forms of political engagement among HE students.