General report

"QUEST for Quality for Students – Consultation Conference"

Valetta, Malta, 29th Nov.-1st Dec. 2012

Contents

QUEST Project

Quality is a loose and rather vague concept and at the same times probably the most important condition of a higher education system. However, what quality means varies according to the perspective taken. The QUEST project has focused on exploring the essential concern of students in Europe about the quality of education and it intends to provide information and means for students themselves to influence quality enhancement and assurance.

The project is built on two pillars that aim at defining a student quality concept and then looking for means to apply and promote this by ESU's student experts' on quality and to empower student led quality vision in member unions.

The first pillar has been focused on research. This contains a pan-European survey of students about, on one hand, what do they see and define as quality of higher education and in which aspects it is important to them. Additionally, the research team has also looked into already existing research and information on quality and quality assurance and information provision through desk research. The project thus compares how existing frameworks enhance and assure quality and how do these processes transmit information back to students, especially in relation to quality assurance processes. As regards to information provision the project compares existing modes with what would be needed from the perspective of the individual students based on what they find as important and proposes student-centred models.

On a more practical level of quality processes, site visits organized to different countries in Europe (Spain, Finland, the Netherlands, Scotland sparqs, Germany) have also took a look into various good practice examples on how institutions can cooperate with the students in order to enhance quality and on how student unions can contribute in an ideal way to the empowerment of their members and for the students to work for more quality in higher education in their institution.

Based on the research, a quality concept has been developed which highlights the students' view on quality and the means by which they are engaged in achieving this. This provides a crucial input to policy makers, institutions and student unions in developing further tools to make quality visible, transparent as well as to assure high level of quality while involving students.

The second pillar of the project referring to training has led to the consolidation of ESUs' Student Experts' Pool, initially created in 2009, and which today consists of over 60 students from 28 countries with diverse quality assurance and student representation expertise and is as such a pool of diverse expertise on the European level. These student experts are involved in the project in validating research results and engaged them in developing a practical handbook and quality toolkit that would enable the student unions to translate the quality concept into practice in a student led way. Furthermore, the project has contributed to further consolidation and strengthening of the experts' pool itself.

This has been achieved through three focused workshops for the student experts and through using the practical knowledge gathered through their experience but also within the site visits. The latter are also aimed at providing ESU members to share good practice, but possibly also to develop new methods and approaches to student engagement in quality assurance processes.

Introduction

Student participation in quality assurance (QA) has been one of the key issues in the Bologna Process, but also one of the success stories of student participation in general. The European Students' Union (ESU) has been actively involved in advocacy of student participation in quality assurance processes and has also been providing expertise, including internal, external, accreditation councils and quality assurance agencies' work. At the end of year 2012, ESU is also coming to an end of all the efforts put into the QUEST research and training agenda.

However, in order to better frame today's state of the art in QA of the European Higher Education Area, an overview of QA developments in Europe is welcomed. Long story short, The *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA, now the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*) was set up in 2000 and the Prague Communiqué of the European education ministers (2001) regards quality as a major factor in determining the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. However, "European QA" formal processes practically kick off in the context of the Bologna treaty with the

Berlin Communiqué (2003) as an action line of Bologna process[1].ENQA was invited together with other partners (EUA, ESU and EURASHE, together composing the so-called "E4 group") to establish a common framework over quality and quality assurance in higher education, which resulted in the establishment of common standards and procedures for QA. With the occasion of the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005 the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) were adopted.The ownership is not only among the "founders" of the ESG but also among the ministers and thus states of Europe. In 2007 the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR) is launched in order to increase transparency of QA, EQAR publishing and managing a list of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) which substantially comply with the ESGs.

Today, after 7 years of theoretical implementation of the ESGs, after a report put together by the E4 group the decision of revising the ESGs has been taken by the Bologna process signatory country representatives committing themselves to *improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope. The revision will be based upon an initial proposal to be prepared by the E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and EQAR, which will be submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group[2].*

The QUEST final conference had not only the role of dissemination of the outcomes of the project, but it also put on the table core problems of the system like interconnection between the different processes of quality assurance (internal, the processes undertaken at institutional level by the Universities – external, process generally conducted by a QAA), visibility of the QA outcomes, involvement of stakeholders (focused on students) in QA and, in broader sense, the future of QA in the European higher education institutions.

Stakeholder participation in QA

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[1] There were other notable initiatives before the Bologna Process (1999), notably *Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP, 1993)* that was launched by the *Association of European Universities (CRE)*, nowadays *European University Association (EUA)* and *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education(1994)*
[2] Bucharest Communiqué 2012

This important topic has been raised in different sessions, which had this specific subject, but interestingly, one simple and general conclusion has been bluntly reiterated on different occasions: absent, emerging, developing, advanced - all stakeholders in the university (academic and administrative staff, students) must participate in the affairs of the institution. Students are full members of the academic community. Students have to be involved because they have responsibility, not because they are costumers.

The student involvement in quality assurance has also been largely discussed in one of the working group sessions where the participants have had an opportunity to exchange experiences and good practices. Student participation in QA presents a success story in the European Higher Education Area, but still more needs to be done, for example student participation in profession/field accreditation is in many parts of Europe very limited. In the same line of thoughts there are other conditions to be met in order to ensure effective and genuine student participation in quality assurance processes. Thus, one of the things mentioned was the existence of transparent procedures and visible results for students. Students' motivation for participation can be enhanced only through effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures. It is essential to differentiate formal from genuine student participation in QA, as in many cases, students are only involved "on paper", meaning that the formal prerequisites are in place, but these, alone, are not sufficient. Other insufficiencies were highlighted at institutional level (where the core of quality is) and how to translate QA to students and thus to make it more relevant.

It seems to be a general agreement on European level about the necessity and benefic role of students in HEI life and QA in particular. Some limitations have been mentioned though, like the short lifecycle of students in higher education (an average of about 3-5 years, time in which is very difficult to develop a genuine knowledge and "feel" of the particular university). University changes very slowly but still a lot has been achieved. Student participation has to be a continuous process in order to become statement engagement. There are obviously different levels of student involvement in Europe; however these have to do with cultural difference and different degrees of development stages of QA systems at national levels.

Other problems emerge from the fact that impact of QA can be observed sometimes very late. Through the evaluation of teacher we can speak about the impact which brings students and teachers together at the discussion and negotiations table. Being aware of the feedback, the academic staff might agree and also students might see that something improved in the teaching-learning process as a result of this feedback exercise. Students need to be aware of this change. This is directly linked with one of the topics of this conference: *Impact of quality assurance through visibility*.

The importance of making the outcomes of QA visible and accessible to the all the stakeholders has been reiterated on several occasions. In the same time, though, it was stressed that these outcomes need to be also visible to the wider public and thus latest developments in European policy has pushed forward the availability and visibility of reports (as results of an external review exercise and even internal self-evaluation reports in some cases) through different mechanisms like the ESG. However, more needs to be done in order to make the reports and outcomes of QA truly accessible to the stakeholders, hence only the formal provisions are not sufficient. Thus the notion of "cognitive accessibility" was mentioned, supporting the idea of putting outcomes of QA (reports, for example) in a plain and conceivable form in order to facilitate understanding of it among stakeholders and interested parts of society.

Another interesting idea arose from the tricky nature of the quality assurance terminology which can sometimes push stakeholders further. Both students and professors don't realise that they are in fact actively dealing with QA processes- designing curricula is already part of QA as a distinct process in the university. There is a strong need to take away the idea QA is purely a bureaucratic process.

One last important remark was about the level of readiness of students for QA processes and thus the need of students getting appropriate training in QA related issues was highlighted. Also, it is important that other students train other students and make QA an interesting and appealing topic in their university life.

Different views on Quality in Higher Education

Starting from the assumption that different stakeholders have different perceptions and expectations towards higher education institutions, they will also hold very different views of what quality of education is and how it should be boosted and maintained[3].

Through its representative, Mr. Stefan Delplace, General Secretary of the European Association of Higher Education Institutes – EURASHE- the position of this representative entity for professionally oriented programs, applied and profession-related research was that it is important to ask ourselves what the purpose of higher education is: personal development, professional enhancement, discipline oriented teaching, employability. A student who graduates from any type of education form must be employable and this is not the same as the employment. Employment is when you prepare someone on for the short time job. Not all changes are for the better. We are undergoing crisis which reflects upon the employment mostly. Economic influence of the education is not forever and it will pass. Employability driven education is not permanent but it is necessary in most scenarios.

On the other hand, Mr. Achim Hopbach, President of the ENQA believes that things have tremendously changed in the last years and it is easy to track those areas where QA has impact, but it is very difficult to measure it (should we even do so?). External QA is one of the major new steering mechanisms in HE and together with other mechanisms they have an impact-however it is difficult to say exactly which is the impact.

A perspective from the Universities point of view was highlighted by Mrs. Tia Loukkola, head of Quality Management and Institutional Evaluation Programme unit of the EUA, was that there is relation between Q and QA, but hard to demonstrate. The procedures themselves will not assure quality, but they are able to detect it. If there is too much regulation in learning process it might lead to less innovation, which is part of quality education.QA has a potential

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[3] more on different perspectives on QA in QUEST research publication

of promoting Q, in conclusion, but it won't necessarily do that without attitudinal and behavioural change at individual level.

When asked if QA has become a great bureaucratic burden for the universities, Mrs. Loukkola replied that the tendency are both ends and, as EUA, they would like to see more institutional accreditation rather than more regulatory programme accreditation. A final important point was made about the quality culture: we always have quality culture, but it can be good or bad. Fruitful quality culture is the engagement, shared responsibility among the community actors, but also procedures which facilitate all these and not leave it up to only one unit to deal with anything.

Students usually have an intrinsic motivation for getting involved in quality assurance as it is the improvement of their own education through the improvement of the study programmes and the university in general and, thus, in students' view it is important to focus on the quality of the learning outcomes and on providing an adequate environment for teaching and learning process.

Quality at different levels: where does the loop close?
The link between external and internal quality assurance

Throughout the Conference, reflections and discussions on how external QA could trickle down to the institutional level and advance quality culture in which there is strong and meaningful student participation and where learning itself becomes more student-centred have been carried out.

One of the main remarks was that external QA should complement internal QA, thus it should be a helpful hand for HEIs to ensure fitness of purpose and be fit for their purpose. The final goal of the system is a working quality system where everyone is committed to producing and maintaining quality culture and external QA should only be a supportive mechanism for fulfilling this desiderate and not just be a strict control instrument. In some positive cases, agencies don't really act as judge and jury but helping hand, enable development and encourage collaboration

and this should be a wide-spread practice.

External QA has to compensate if the internal processes are lacking, but shouldn't and couldn't replace it. External mechanism for QA should foster the idea that institutions should be responsible for their own quality.

Periodicity of the external reviews was another point tackled since the majority of national regulations prescribe a 5 year cycle, but what happens in between represents a gap which hinders the continuous engagement of external bodies in the universities' quality assurance and enhancement processes. The same thing is valid in the case of reports- participant claiming that many universities prepare reports exclusively for and before an external review takes place.

External and internal are not always linked. Sometimes actors get too caught up in external reviews that they forget to sit down and think about what QA means for students, teachers etc

In conclusion, the external review philosophy is based on the continuity of the process, but in practice many actions are ongoing during but not between. Depending on the case, we can speak of follow-ups, but regardless if they happen due to external constrains, they should be initiated at management level, in a culture of collaboration with all of stakeholders.

What next? – About ESG revision, Rankings and Students pursuing Quality of Education

Top-down change of policy does not necessarily lead to a change of mindset or change of quality culture in an institution.

T: they should be active,get involved and informed. The student shouldn't get scared if not involved but push the agenda for this. At grassroot level, students should not adapt the consumer model. Hard to balance between being a partner and a consumer.

S: students should continue to believe that they have an impact. There are too few students concerned with QA. Stick to your status as the heart of the process. Subject-matter + stakeholder with an impact.

T: EUA-IEP before student participation had a very heated debate whether to introduce a student.many long discussions. General agreement that students have a positive impact. –as a concrete example of success story.

A: NUSes should engage in a discussion about their aims in QA, purpose of QA, and engage in a broader discussion about which of their aims they would like to reach with whch tools and also ask other stakeholders -> this might contribute to the overall discussions.

The ESGs as a set of generic principles of QA and not procedures, as originally expected. It prescribes what Institutions should do, but not how they should undergo a task, thus it relies on some principles like: institutional responsibilities for QA; fitness for purpose of external QA (there are still a variety of approaches of external QA at European level), stakeholder participation and context sensitivity (not a *one fits all* approach).

There are huge varieties in national QA systems (from programme and institutional evaluations, to accreditations and audits) and also a great autonomy in establishing internal systems of QA.

Participation of students in QA prescribed by ESG: at institutional level, external reviews and QA governance. Still, there is a difference between formal and active involvement of students in QA.

Thus full recognition of students as full and active stakeholders of QA process remains an issue.

Overview of the conclusions

- National policies and legislative frameworks are necessary but not sufficient tools for student participation in QA

- **Link between internal-external** QA: ExtQA <u>should complement IntQA</u>, should be a <u>helpful hand</u> for HEI to ensure fitness of purpose and be fit for their purpose

- **Impact of QA through visibility**: the latest developments in Eu policy has pushed forward the availability and visibility of reports (through different mechanisms like ESG).However, more needs to be done in order to make the reports and outcomes of QA truly accessible to the stakeholders – cognitive accessible

- Students have to be involved because they have responsibility, not because they are costumers. University changes very slowly but still a lot has been achieved

- Problem is that impact can be evaluated sometimes very late. Through the evaluation of teacher, we can speak about the impact which brings students and teachers together, behind the discussion and negotiations table. Being aware of the feedback teachers might agree and also students might see that something improved in the work of a teacher afterwards. Students need to be aware of this change. Same comes for the long term issues.

- Different views on Q and thus QA and QE depending on the viewer.

Further reading

Annex I

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME
30th November, Friday
Part I: Setting the scene

09.00 – 10.00 **Welcome words and introduction**

- *Mario Cachia, President of KSU*
- *Prof. Juanito Camilleri, Rector of the University of Malta*
- *Hon. Dolores Cristina, Minister of Education and Employment (tbc)*
- *Karina Ufert, Chairperson of ESU – Recent developments in QA and way forward*

10.00 – 10.30 **Presentation of QUEST project outcomes, preliminary findings of ESU research activities** *by Liliya Ivanova, Executive Committee member of ESU .*

10.30 – 11.00 Coffee break

11.00 – 12.30 P**arallel working sessions**

Session 1: The link between external and internal quality assurance

Input by: Representative from Malta, Quality Assurance sector
Dr. Marja-Liisa Saarilammi, Finnish Higher education evaluation council (FINHEEC)

Session 2: Impact of quality assurance through visibility

Input by: Representative from Malta, Quality Assurance sector

Axel Aerden, Accreditation organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)

Session 3: Stakeholders' participation in Quality Assurance

12.30 – 14.00 Lunch break

14.00 – 15.30 **Roundtable discussion – "QUEST for More Europe?"**

- *Tia Loukkola, Head of Unit Quality Management, European University Association (EUA)*
- *Achim Hopbach, President of European Association for QA in Higher education (ENQA)*
- *Stephan Delplace, Secretary General of European Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE)*

Moderator: Allan Päll

Rapporteur: ESU

15.30 – 16.30 **QUEST Café – restyled World Café for QUEST**

1st December, Saturday

Part II: Getting a grip on recent developments in QA

09.30 – 10.30 **Discussion – Not everything, that can be counted, counts?**

U-Multirank presentation by Dr. Don Westerheijden, Centre for Higher Education Policy studies (CHEPS)

10.30 – 10.45 Coffee Break

Part III: QUEST for Quality for Students

10.45 – 12.15 **Parallel workshop sessions – developing students' quality concept**

1. ESG implementation – what we can learn from the past?
2. Students' participation in QA – status quo.
3. Students' engagement in QA – support mechanisms.
4. How to connect the three key quality circles: teacher, student and quality? – Christine Lechner, Innsbruck University
5. EU2020 Review – Elisabeth Gehrke, ESU

12.15 – 13.00 Lunch break

13.00 – 14.30 **Parallel workshop sessions continue**

1. ESG revision – way forward – Karina Ufert, ESU
2. Students' participation in QA – how to strengthen it – Liliya Ivanova, ESU
3. Students' engagement in QA – support mechanisms – Iain Delworth, sparqs
4. EU2020 Review – Elisabeth Gehrke, ESU

14.30 – 14.45 Coffee Break

14.45 – 16.30 **Closing part**

- Address by Dr Philip von Brockdorff, Chairman of the national commission for Higher education (NCFHE)
- Final report of the Consultation seminar by Alina Gavra
- ESU Closing remarks