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Student involvement in the processes of quality assurance agencies

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Foreword

In recent years, the role of students in the quality assurance of higher education has become recognised, across Europe, as being both necessary and desirable.

Students have increasingly become involved in the improvement and enhancement of their own learning experiences. Whether it be through providing feedback on the courses they have taken, contributing to the development of learning and teaching in their subject area, participating in university decision making processes, or representing student views in any number of ways through a student union or other representative body – students' voices are today being heard loudly and clearly and, ever more often, their views are being taken seriously.

This report brings together a wide range of sources of evidence about the variety of types and levels of involvement of students in the quality assurance of higher education in the European Higher Education Area. Students are involved within the processes of their 'own' institutions, as part of the quality assurance of institutions and programmes by outside bodies, and in the review of the quality assurance of those bodies themselves. Participation takes many forms, both formal and informal.

ENQA provides opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas on all areas of the quality assurance of higher education. The rich diversity of student involvement with quality assurance provides us with an abundant resource from which we can research and share good practice and so help all involved to learn and to develop. I hope this report will assist with the achievement of that objective.

Peter Williams
President,
ENQA

Chapter 4: Student involvement in quality assurance agency processes: the Catalan experience

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4.1 Introduction

There are many building blocks out of which the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is being constructed. One element is the push to involve students more in quality assurance processes. This serves as the context for the initiative by AQU Catalunya and the Catalan universities to organise training courses for students. The training project has a twofold aim: in the short term, to train students so that they can take part in the various external assessment committees appointed by the AQU and, in the medium term, to promote the active participation of students in decision-making bodies.

AQU Catalunya has, for a considerable time, maintained the policy of taking the student body into consideration as one of the main users of the university and as a stakeholder involved in quality assurance processes.

Student involvement at all university levels was low when AQU Catalunya started the Student involvement in quality assessment processes project in 2004. The aim of the project has been to train students in university quality processes and to provide them with the necessary skills to participate fully. A second aim has been to obtain a pool of students who are adequately prepared to take part in external assessment committees and to ultimately promote a culture of student involvement in the Catalan University System.

Three cycles of the project have taken place in Catalan universities over the past two years, with over 80 students participating.

4.2 AQU Catalunya and student involvement

AQU Catalunya is the official quality assurance body in the Catalan university system consisting of twelve universities (seven public/state-run and five private) with a total of 231,000 students, 450 degree courses and 15,000 teaching staff. It was established by law in 1996 as a consortium between the public universities in Catalonia and the autonomous Catalan government. AQU Catalunya was a founder member of ENQA.

The philosophy of AQU Catalunya is to assist university institutions in promoting a quality culture and not so much to serve as a body for inspection or control. One of the main action lines of the Agency has comprised of working together with the stakeholders in the university system to reach a consensus on quality policies. In relation to student involvement, it was the public universities' Committee of Vice-Rectors for Student Affairs that gave the green light to the project presented here.

Prior to starting the project, AQU Catalunya had already undertaken actions to promote the involvement of university students in quality assurance. Students have

been taken into consideration in assessment processes right from the start of the Agency's activities, and all assessments have included at least two students in the internal assessment committees. AQU Catalunya also carries out periodic assessments of graduate placement and employment (1998, 2003) and of other areas such as secondary school students entering university (1999). AQU Catalunya has also published various General Frameworks (documents drawn up by experts that set up good practices) that especially refer to students, for example the *General framework for dealing with student suggestions, complaints and appeals* [5] and the *General framework for assessing student learning* [6].

4.3 The context of student involvement at the university level

Although student involvement in decision-making structures is regulated by law, these requirements tend not to be applied on the ground and so, within the context of the Catalan university system, student involvement in general is minimal. A very small number of students participate in the elections of Rectors and in student meetings and associations. Up to now, there has been no Catalan representation at ESIB (National Unions of Students in Europe). Students prefer to be involved in social movements and NGOs. As regards the involvement within universities, there is a high level of abstention and therefore there have been no requests from students to participate in assessment processes.

The reasons for this could be, perhaps, found in the current trend in society towards individualism, which weakens collective participation. Students have the view that they are merely "passing through" the university, and feel that it is not possible for them to influence the running of the institution. Catalan student associations also tend to be incestuous in their appointment and exchange of representatives. Moreover, academic life absorbs a lot of the students' available time and as a result political activism in universities appears to be decreasing.

The main challenge for the students who are involved is to try to be seen as collaborators in, more than users of, higher education so that they become important players in the planning and governance of university institutions and give up the role of being merely passive receivers of the training process.

This challenge comes from some of the current trends at the European level:
- Berlin Communiqué (2003): "Students are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student involvement are largely in place throughout the EHEA. They also call on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in HE governance"
- The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area: (3.7. External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies) "[…]an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s)"

[5] General framework for suggestions, complaints and claims from students, Barcelona, AQU Catalunya, 2004. Available from Internet: http://www.nokut.no/graphics/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/Generell/Rapporter/EAIR_CDRom_paper-end.pdf

[6] General guidelines for the assessment of student performance. Barcelona: AQU Catalunya, 2003. Available from Internet: http://www.aqucatalunya.org/uploads/publicacions/arxiu%20pdf/MGAprenentatges_cat.pdf

- EUA reports: "[…] students should be involved in the decision-making processes. To make students committed to the educational evaluation activities. They should have a real responsibility to inform and advise the Senate" (10 years on, by Stefanie Hofmann)

In Spain and Catalonia, student involvement is also promoted in the corresponding legal frameworks:
- Spanish Universities Act, LOU 2006 (Art. 46) "[… students] must receive recognition for participating in university life"
- Catalan Universities Act, LUC 2003 (Art 40) "[…] the involvement and participation of students in the sphere of associative activities is to be encouraged".

From a practical point of view, student involvement could considerably improve assessment practices as it encourages the identification of new quality criteria adapted to the aims of new degrees (including, for example, the competence of students to learn on their own). In order to achieve this, improvements need to be made in the training of all the players involved. Students and teaching staff also need designated places where they can meet to discuss the new participative teaching culture. Resources are required to set up innovative activities, learning from other countries where university quality assurance is well developed.

The initiative being presented here by AQU Catalunya, albeit a modest contribution, underpins the theoretical and legal frameworks for dealing with the challenge of this transformation.

4.4 Project: Promoting student involvement in programme evaluations - training courses

AIMS

The purpose of the project *Promoting student involvement in programme evaluations - training courses*, the details of which are given below, is to run training courses for university students.

The project has a twofold aim. The short term aim is to train students so that they can participate in the various external assessment committees appointed by the AQU. The idea is to create a steady stream of students who are capable of becoming external assessors and not a closed body of "assessment professionals". The second aim is a long term one and more ambitious: it seeks to promote the active participation of students in university quality assurance policies and thereby to help to establish a participative culture in Catalan universities.

From the institutional point of view, the main aim is to provide students with a transversal or horizontal competence of participation and with further skills for critical analysis. As a consequence, their experiences and ideas can contribute to the improvement of degree programmes. The ultimate aim is to bring about a new type of student association, the members of which become more interested in the technical aspects of the universities.

From the perspective of the students, the aim is to familiarise the students with AQU quality assessment model, which is done through a framework of practical exercises. The students have to analyse and deal with problems concerning assessment and the

role of students, and they will then be able to participate in real assessment situations. Plans have also been designed in order to simulate, through the use of role play, for example, the external committee meetings where the students have to prepare an oral report.

STAKEHOLDERS

There are three main stakeholders involved in the project, the students, the universities and AQU Catalunya. The role of each of these in order for the project to work is as follows.

The students participate in the training courses and receive training in matters dealing with quality assessment. Upon completion, they become qualified to take part in external assessment committees (it is preferred that they participate in the assessment of degrees that are similar to their own but from another university). They must then act as disseminators of the experience amongst their classmates, and give feedback on the whole process.

The universities, through the Vice-Rectors Committee for Student Affairs, approve the project and then select and propose the students who are to take the course. They also appoint the tutorial teaching staff for the course. It is up to the universities to actually organise the courses and give impetus to the project within the given university.

AQU Catalunya draws up the proposal for the training course and, at the same time, appoints a group of experts to prepare the course materials. This group of experts, in which the majority of the Catalan universities are represented, is responsible for compiling good practices for encouraging student involvement using international sources (for example the Nordic project on student involvement and ESIB publications). AQU Catalunya funds the project and also serves as the link with the external assessments in which trained students participate. The results of the experience are put together in a dossier, which is then made available to other universities interested in organising similar courses.

DESIGN

In order to design the courses, it was necessary to define the profile of the students to whom the course would be aimed at and who ideally would become involved, together with the type of training they would receive.

In the terms of the student profile, it was necessary to consider whether to make an open call to all students, the majority of which have very limited knowledge of participative dynamics, or to aim at certain specific student profiles. The decision was finally made to aim the call at students who were especially motivated by improvement and had a vocation to serve in the project.

It is necessary for this type of training to assume no prior knowledge. The contents must also have an added value to make the training attractive, as well as it being useful for the student's life at university and professional career in the future.

Participation is seen as being an instrument and not an end in itself, with emphasis being put on participation in external assessment committees. This means that the participation has to be formal (with specific contents), external and semi-professional.

Other aspects, which follow, were also taken into account in the design of the training courses.

Duration and aims: At the planning stage, it was necessary to be realistic regarding the course's duration, i.e. that it should not be too short or too long. Twenty to thirty hours were considered to constitute an appropriate length, concentrated where possible into one week in order to provide for group cohesion and thereby stimulate the students' motivation and enthusiasm. This also ensured that the sequence of training topics would stay in order and that the course would not go on for an excessively long time. It was also necessary for the aims of the course to be sufficiently interesting to maintain the students' motivation (through the development of skills like interpersonal communication, negotiation, reasoning, etc.), and at the same time to take into account the aims of the institution giving the course.

Content selection and sequence: The primary requirement of the training was to provide the students with knowledge about the university system and with information on the aims and work associated with quality assessment. It was also thought that students would need self-confidence and assertiveness in oral communication, with the emphasis put on communication skills (drafting of reports, public speaking, the ability to come to conclusions, etc.). Students also need to be trained in procedural aspects, such as the understanding of assessment protocols, so that upon the completion of the course they are capable of reviewing and improving the procedures.

Teaching methodology: As the students require training in the techniques of participation in assessment committees, the methodology needs to be tailored towards the practical and participatory. The majority of the activities therefore require the students to actively participate in group activities, which are based on the study of specific cases prepared especially for the course. This design enables continuous feedback to be obtained on the different activities. The simulation of real situations (committee meetings, oral presentation of reports, etc.) is highly useful for helping the students to acquire greater confidence.

Assessment: Given that the course assessment methods are intended to be formative rather than conclusive, the trainers ask exploratory questions at the beginning of each activity regarding the students' prior level of knowledge. At the end of the activity there needs to be time for reflection so that improvements can be made to the course design for the future. At the end of the course, the students receive an official certificate accrediting their achievement of the course objectives.

Team of trainers: Priority should be given to trainers with a dynamic and committed profile, rather than to those who just transmit content. It is better that the course is given by a team of trainers with a variety of profiles than just one person. Team members can include university teaching staff, experts in assessment, former students and international experts who can present innovative approaches, with all of these working in a coordinated way.

One final point, to be a success it is vital that support for the initiative is forthcoming from the university's management teams.

STRENGTHS OF THE PROJECT

The course has been prepared and organised by working groups that include representatives from practically all the Catalan universities' teaching offices and quality units, meaning that it is a shared experience. Students have expressed a high level of satisfaction with the training received, and many of them have sent their curriculum vitae to AQU and so they have been included in the assessors' register.

The course teaching materials are provided to Catalan universities, and details are made available so that other similar courses may be organised.

Although students are not experts in academic matters, they are experts in affairs that affect them directly i.e. university facilities, the learning process, etc. Drawing from the AQU experience, it can be stated that students can work efficiently in external assessment committees and there is a good team spirit.

The participation of students in external assessments gives greater credibility to the quality assurance process by taking into account the points of view of other stakeholders involved in the process. It is also accepted by the university community because it adds value to the assessment process.

By taking these training seminars, students attain not only skills and knowledge relating to assessment but also new competences such as group work experience, better communication skills, etc. Students who take part in these seminars receive 3 credits (1 ECTS) and have the possibility of being called by AQU to participate as external assessors.

WEAKNESS

As mentioned earlier, there is a low-level of student participation in university structures generally, so recruitment of students for the project takes place against a negative backdrop.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

AQU Catalunya is aware that, to get the students to participate more actively, coordinated action by the stakeholders will be necessary in order to disseminate as widely as possible the information on the courses among students. The courses that have been run so far have been a modest but at the same time groundbreaking initiative. The challenge now is to set up a Catalan network in which the universities, teaching staff and student associations are all involved in promoting student involvement in quality assurance processes. The overall challenge facing the entire university community is to increase participation in a natural and progressive way and at all university levels.

Conversations are taking place with the Council of Catalan Universities, which is the coordinating body for all of the universities in Catalonia, to participate in this project subsequent to the pilot experience of the AQU. The next step forward is to promote not just individual student participation but also the involvement of student and other organisations.

Anticipated actions that also need to be considered include: editing of all materials, publishing of a General Framework to promote student participation, provision of collaboration grants, etc.

AQU has taken note of experiences such as SPARQS (Scotland) and the report on the *Student Involvement in Quality Assessments of Higher Education in the Nordic Countries*[7], which can be used as examples against which this project can be benchmarked.

CONCLUSIONS

The project presented above has relied on three stakeholder groups (students, universities and AQU Catalunya), without the participation of which it would have been impossible to go on. Most of the universities in the Catalan university system have been represented from the very beginning in the working groups involved in the course design.

The result is a practice-oriented course that lasts a maximum of thirty hours, the contents of which are quality assessment and cross-cutting competences designed to prepare students to take part in external assessment committees.

The project has so far provided AQU Catalunya with a group of qualified students who have already participated in external assessment committees. It also represents a modest first step towards promoting the culture of student involvement in Catalan universities.

The current challenge is to get as many students and universities involved as possible, in order for the project to become an on-going process.

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[7] http://www.noqa.net