

Working together to take quality forward

A selection of papers from
the 8th European Quality Assurance Forum

21-23 November 2013

Hosted by the University of Gothenburg, Sweden



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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) has been organised by the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) since 2006. The 8th Forum, held at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, showed once again that quality assurance professionals derive significant benefits from meeting and exchanging ideas with their colleagues from various national and organisational backgrounds.

Participants from approximately 50 countries, including academics and administrators responsible for internal quality assurance, students, representatives from QA agencies, national authorities, intergovernmental organisations and researchers in quality development in higher education and research, exchanged, discussed and debated together for three days, true to the spirit of this year's theme "Working together to take quality forward".

The majority of the plenary and parallel sessions explored how both individuals and organisations can better understand the role that quality assurance plays in their daily lives, get involved and work together. In the discussions, there was a particular emphasis on the concept of "quality culture" and the importance of fostering attitudes and values. This publication gathers together a sample of the contributions to the Forum, and hopes to serve as an inspiration to everyone involved in QA.

On behalf of the Forum Steering Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support: the University of Gothenburg that hosted the Forum with wonderful organisation and hospitality; those actors in the field of QA who submitted 80 papers and workshop proposals to the Forum; the keynote speakers; and staff of EUA's Quality Management Unit as well as Events team, who spearheaded the organisation on behalf of the E4.

Discussions will continue in the next EQAF, which will be hosted by the University of Barcelona in Spain, from 13 to 15 November 2014. We look forward to welcoming you then.

Norma Ryan

Chair, Forum Steering Committee

Analysing the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level: Outcomes of the IBAR project

By Don F. Westerheijden¹ and Jan Kohoutek²

Introduction

Adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) (ENQA, 2005) is considered one of the major achievements of the Bologna Process. The ESG were adopted at the ministerial conference in Bergen, 2005, with the aim of establishing comparable criteria and methodologies for quality assurance applicable across all European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries through a set of non-prescriptive standards and guidelines while maintaining room for institutional diversity and autonomy (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010). More particularly, three fundamental principles were observed during the process of formulating the ESG: the interests of students, employers and society more generally in delivering higher education of sufficient quality; the central importance of institutional autonomy, tempered by recognition that autonomy implies accountability; and the need for a “fitness for purpose” approach to external quality assurance ensuring that the burden it places on institutions is no greater than necessary (Williams, 2007). Part 1 of the ESG concerns principles and areas that internal quality assurance in higher education institutions ought to apply to be compatible in the EHEA; parts 2 and 3 mainly concern external quality assurance and are not part of our study.

Since 2005, implementation of the ESG has centred on national quality assurance agencies (Hopbach, 2006; Langfeldt *et al.*, 2010; Stensaker *et al.*, 2010) rather than on the standards and guidelines related to quality within individual higher education institutions (cf. Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). Responding to the paucity of research into quality assurance at the institutional level (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010), our study analysed implementation of the ESG Part 1 in a structured sample of four higher education institutions in each of seven Bologna signatory countries: the Czech Republic (CZ), Latvia (LV), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovakia (SK) and the United Kingdom (UK). Our paper results from the EU-funded project “Identifying barriers in promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level” (IBAR) (www.ibar-llp.eu). The IBAR project ran from 2011 to 2013. Before proceeding to the identification of drivers and barriers, the presentation of conceptual and methodological premises underlying the enquiry into the ESG Part 1 is in order.

Making sense of the ESG Part 1 conceptually and methodologically

The ESG Part 1 contain seven quality standards for assuring quality within higher education institutions,³ each standard being accompanied by guidelines for their implementation (ENQA, 2005). For the purpose of our study, the ESG Part 1 were operationalised into six thematic areas: quality and access, quality and

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³ These are: policy and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; assessment of students; quality assurance of teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information systems; public information.

students, quality and management/governance, quality and stakeholders, quality and teaching staff, quality and information (see Figure 1).⁴ This research design made it possible to expand the scope of the enquiry beyond the ESG Part 1 content as such, thus making investigations within a wider context and linking them to areas typical of higher education research (cf. Tight, 2003).

Figure 1: Correspondence between IBAR themes and ESG Part 1

Thematic area	ESG Part 1
Quality and Access	ESG 1.1 – <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.6 – <i>Information systems</i>
Quality and Student Assessment	ESG 1.3 – <i>Assessment of students</i>
Quality and Management/Governance	ESG 1.1 – <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.2 – <i>Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</i> ESG 1.5 – <i>Learning resources and student support</i>
Quality and Stakeholders	ESG 1.1 – <i>Policy and procedures for quality assurance</i> ESG 1.2 – <i>Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</i>
Quality and Teaching Staff	ESG 1.4 – <i>Quality assurance of teaching staff</i>
Quality and Information	ESG 1.6 – <i>Information systems</i> ESG 1.7 – <i>Public information</i>

Adopted from: Rosa, M.J., & Amaral, A. (2013)

The empirical enquiry was underpinned by a set of theoretical assumptions on implementation of quality assurance processes in learning environments. First, quality is a complex, multifaceted concept prone to contestation (political, empirical), which leads to the argument that there are (at least) as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are categories of stakeholders present (Brennan *et al.*, 1992). Second, the chain of events between the adoption of the ESG as the Bologna policy programme and quality practices of higher education institutions is studied – as a policy implementation process. Third, policy implementation takes place in a multi-level, multi-actor environment; actors have positions and interests that affect how they view, use and implement the ESG. Fourth, higher education institutions are complex organisations in themselves, with decentralised structures and different institutional logics not least due to the professional autonomy and discretion of front-line academic staff. Fifth, the Bologna Process stands for an international policy-making process in which one of the policy axioms is that diversity is a strength of European higher education, implying that some degree of flexibility is intended in the implementation of the ESG. From this, it follows, sixth, that implementation of the Bologna programmatic goals is a decision-making process in its own right, meaning that shifts, slippage, sub-goal optimisation and other distortions of the original goals must be expected during the process, especially when implementation depends on actors' interactions in decentralised settings (Pülzl and Treib, 2007; Scharpf, 1997; Winter, 2003). For this reason, one should speak of translation of programmatic goals into institutional shop-floor level realities rather than of top-down implementation (cf. Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007). The same ideas are expressed in the metaphor of an "implementation staircase" (as used in Trowler, 2002).

Empirical enquiry into the ESG Part 1 should lead to identification of types of drivers and barriers (external, internal) that might help or hinder translation of the ESG Part 1 standards and guidelines in institutional settings. Our focus is on practices, i.e. actual existing processes and structures, rather than only on written policies. The relevant practices are teaching and its associated processes ranging from making resources

⁴ In addition, IBAR contained work packages on internal quality assurance systems and on the links between secondary and higher education.

available for teaching (staff, lecture halls, equipment, etc.) to student assessment practices and awarding of diplomas or degrees, to quality assurance and enhancement of the teaching process.

Methodologically, the enquiry is based on a qualitative approach combining in-depth study of relevant policy documents (laws, by-laws, regulations, rules, reports, codes of practice and the like) with semi-structured interviews. The interviews, complemented on occasion by other means of qualitative information enquiry (focus groups), have been conducted across the sample of 28 higher education institutions, with several categories of actors (i.e. teaching staff, managers, students, administrators, policy advisers) for each thematic area. The interviews were structured by the research questions. On average, we interviewed 15 to 20 respondents per institution for each thematic area (repeated interviews of the same person(s) occurred; national-level interviews were added as necessary).

Implementing the ESG Part 1: Major empirical findings

Starting with access to higher education, for most higher education institutions participating in the enquiry, this area has continued to be “state-owned” with governments retaining power over the expanding size and composition of student enrolments as well as the costs of the system to (re-)invigorate the contribution of higher education to each country’s economic competitiveness. In this respect, some higher education institutions surveyed (UK, NL, PT) indicated the systemic constraints on their autonomy in terms of developing distinct, access-oriented strategic decision-making and policy profiles. For example, Portuguese higher education institutions were steered away from focusing on quantity to a more diversified offer of programmes and more diverse student participation, which seemed to curtail higher education institutions’ ability to select students in particular subject areas. For some higher education institutions located in central and eastern Europe (CZ, SK) equity of access concerning students from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds was an issue for which current statutory measures were deemed insufficient, more so in the absence of any targeted financial provision to redress the imbalance (PL higher education institutions). Lastly, effects of the financial crisis significantly impacted capacities of some UK and LV higher education institutions to admit new entrants, leading to institutional instability owing to staff cuts and re-organisation.

Unlike access issues, procedures of student assessment were governed by higher education institutions themselves, devolved to within-institutional levels notwithstanding the national frameworks in place. However, tendencies to formalise and centralise assessment designs were noticed at UK higher education institutions and some NL higher education institutions under analysis. This was due to rising pressures for transparency and accountability, e.g. the UK’s National Student Survey. Portuguese higher education institutions reported formalised provisions for assessment of special-regime learners, i.e. working students (class attendance, exemptions from some tasks subject to assessment). Regarding application of formative and summative assessment, the enquiry results seemed to be split between higher education institutions placing greater weight on formative approaches (some PT, LV, SK higher education institutions) and those reporting preference for summative assessment mainly due to massification pressures (some UK, NL and CZ higher education institutions). Significant differences among sampled higher education institutions were found in institutionalisation of learning outcomes-based curricula and assessment methods, with UK higher education institutions most advanced, NL and PL higher education institutions in transition stages and CZ, SK and LV higher education institutions having started on the process. Portuguese higher education institutions reported that institutionalisation of learning outcomes-oriented assessment designs was complicated by linguistic issues.

Coming to governance issues, all analysed higher education institutions had distinct policies on quality assurance. Somewhat predictably, bottom-up quality approaches did not prevail within our sample. Rather,

most higher education institutions surveyed showed a combination of top-down and hybrid quality approaches (CZ, NL, PL, LV). Only in the UK, the prevailing approach appeared to be top-down whilst PT institutions prevalently seemed to apply hybrid quality principles. In SK, a combination seemed to emerge of bottom-up and hybrid quality cultures. Research findings on quality assurance governance structures thus pointed to problematic alignment, arising from tensions between central administration and the shop-floor level. For instance, at some Czech higher education institutions, there has been an increase in the role top management played in quality issues with the decision-making culture promoting top-down arrangements, which somewhat hindered shop-floor level quality initiatives. With regard to learning resources and infrastructure, all higher education institutions surveyed systematically improved their material and technological base by equipping teaching facilities, laboratories, libraries, etc. On this matter, central and eastern European (CEE) higher education institutions (LV, SK, CZ, PL) particularly stressed the importance of EU structural funds.

Throughout all 28 higher education institutions, stakeholders (next to the academic staff of the institutions) were involved in quality activities. National regulations seemed to form the most important “filter” for stakeholder category representation; the higher education institutions reviewed complied with national regulations and did not often develop internal regulations going much beyond national regulatory frameworks. In internal as well as external quality assurance, students appeared as the most prominent group of stakeholders (all higher education institutions surveyed). However, a “health warning” came from the UK studies: overseas students, mature and part-time students remained widely under-represented. Also, student representation was sometimes “tokenistic”, not giving real influence (UK, NL); in PT similar remarks were made about employers’ representatives. In fact, academic self-regulation remained strong, even if it included “stakeholder” colleagues (typically SK higher education institutions with more than 50% of external stakeholders coming from other higher education institutions). Yet, evidence from most higher education institutions pointed strongly to increasing involvement of non-academic external stakeholders, so likely, in Clark’s (1983) terms, the coordination mechanism has inched towards the market. Importantly, most analysed higher education institutions reported unawareness of the ESG Part 1 among internal stakeholders (teaching staff, administrators, students) except for a quite limited number of top-level managerial staff (CZ case).

Closer investigation into the status of academic staff showed some division in recruitment patterns, with higher education institutions in CEE countries (LV, PL, SK, CZ) tending to follow national legislation and accreditation criteria primarily related to scientific degrees, whereas in western higher education institutions studied (UK, PT, NL) recruitment seemed to be more closely related to institutional/faculty/departmental strategic needs. The same division was observed concerning strategies of staff motivation. West-European higher education institutions (UK, PT, NL) stressed increasing internal motivation, based on the presumption that teachers are intrinsically motivated. In contrast, CEE higher education institutions indicated the effectiveness of external, in particular financial, incentives. Regarding staff training, institutional attitudes varied from conducting obligatory systematic policy aimed at raising staff qualifications (UK, NL, PT, LV), via occasional activities determined by funding for this purpose (PL) to rather ad-hoc measures (CZ, SK). The issue of research drift is a reality at all analysed higher education institutions but especially stressed by staff of CEE higher education institutions.

Finally, the sample showed identifiable differences in handling information. Whilst all higher education institutions surveyed had institutionalised some systems for data collection, analysis and disclosure, their degree of maturity differed. In comparison, UK and NL higher education institutions attained higher participation rates in internal student quality surveys and exhibited more developed alumni tracking systems including employment destinations. Most other higher education institutions surveyed (PT, PL, SK, CZ, LV) struggled with low student participation rates in surveys and also struggled with reliable long-term monitoring of alumni. Interestingly, although all 28 higher education institutions paid attention to disclosing information to the public, they seemed to make relatively little effort to verify information objectiveness and impartiality.

Concluding remarks on barriers to the ESG

All thematic areas show that higher education institutions pay attention to issues covered by the ESG Part 1. Direct influence of the ESG was almost never visible, i.e. we did not come across quality assurance policies or practices in higher education institutions changed in recent years explicitly to “implement” the ESG. National policy acted as a “filter” in some areas, e.g. access, governance of quality assurance (including position of stakeholders) and staff appointment and promotion rules.

National filtering might imply potential drivers for ESG-conform policies (national authorities “forcing” higher education institutions to comply e.g. through accreditation criteria), however national influence went in different directions. Thus, staff promotion criteria and national salary policies in the CEE countries did not give room to higher education institutions to focus much on teaching performance. In some CEE countries, national policies on equitable access of minorities might be driving in directions intended by the Bologna Process and (implicitly) by the ESG, but could then be seen as barriers to quality by higher education institutions, especially if national regulations were not supported by other policy tools such as funding. Western higher education institutions sometimes also saw national policies as barriers to institutional autonomy. But those national policies might drive implementation of the ESG more than leaving higher education institutions full freedom to comply – or not to comply. This consideration might apply to access, and to gathering and disseminating information on quality. Concerning the latter, the UK and NL seemed to be leading, which however might be explained by their longstanding “New Public Management” (NPM) approaches to public policy (NPM stresses accountability and transparency) rather than a larger degree of implementation of the ESG.

Different national approaches could also explain the different degrees of implementing learning outcome-based curricula, where UK higher education institutions still maintained a head start compared to those in other countries. Yet curriculum (its regular review) and assessment are more influenced by higher education institutions than by national policies.

While we tried to study practices rather than written policies, in particular in studying stakeholders, we encountered signs that official policies and written statements might look better than actual practice (“tokenism”).

There was not a clear-cut east-west distinction in all perspectives, yet it was visible in several thematic areas. CEE higher education institutions appeared to be characterised by a culture focusing on academic freedom and academic autonomy, while in Western countries these values were less important and managerial autonomy and NPM values like accountability seemed stronger. This was especially the case in the UK and NL, implying a south-north sub-division with PT in a different position than the former two. It is not always a matter of NPM influence, though: concerning summative assessment the UK and NL are joined by CZ, implying that massification of higher education has an influence on academe independent from national policy-making styles.

Overall then, the ESG Part 1 seem to be functioning as a *codification* of many policies and practices of quality assurance in higher education institutions even in the countries studied, thus establishing commonality of criteria and methodologies only to some extent. They may need more time (together with further adaptation of national policies in many countries) to act as *modification* of some practices closer to the “inner life” of academe, especially learning outcome-based curricula and assessment; recognition of teaching in academic careers; serious consideration of stakeholders in quality assurance and curriculum review.

Moreover, we still await a good answer to whether the ESG could fulfil their intended functions as a cross-national instrument for capacity building, especially for higher education institutions in transition and

post-transition countries, e.g. the Balkans, post-Soviet countries, also some higher education institutions in Central Europe, and for promotion of trust in higher education all over the EHEA.

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A collaboration between AEQES and CTI for the joint evaluation and accreditation of civil engineering programmes

By Teresa Sanchez Chaparro,⁵ Bernard Remaud,⁶ Caty Duykaerts⁷ and Marie Malmedy⁸

Introduction

In December 2009, after an official demand coming from four universities of the French Community of Belgium (FCB), AEQES (Agence pour l'évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur, a generalist evaluation agency) and CTI (Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, an engineering accreditation agency) initiated collaboration in order to organise a joint mission whose objective was twofold: the evaluation of engineering programmes according to AEQES' legal requirements; and their accreditation according to CTI's criteria.

This paper presents the main outcomes of this joint mission which was finalised in October 2013. After describing the institutional background of the two agencies, the methodological implementation of the collaboration is presented and analysed. Finally, the authors present some lessons learnt and lines for future action.

Presentation of the two quality agencies

Presentation of AEQES

AEQES was established by the French Community of Belgium in 2002 and restructured in 2008. Its mission is to:

- ensure that the study programmes organised by the institutions are subject to regular evaluations, highlighting best practice and any inadequacies or problems which need to be resolved;
- promote, in collaboration with all higher education institutions, the introduction of best practice, allowing for enhancement in the quality of teaching in each institution;
- provide information to the government, stakeholders and beneficiaries of higher education on the quality of higher education;
- formulate suggestions, addressed to policy makers, in order to improve the overall quality of higher education;
- make any proposals deemed to be of use for the accomplishment of its missions, at its own initiative or request;
- represent the French Community of Belgium in national and international bodies in matters concerning quality assurance in higher education.

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AEQES uses a formative quality evaluation process, working in a context where an authorisation (“habilitation”) is granted *ex ante* by government decree. The results of the evaluation process therefore have no formal effects in terms of an institution’s funding or authorisation. AEQES does not carry out any scoring or ranking of institutions and believes that such an approach encourages the emergence of a quality culture among stakeholders involved in higher education, promoting its appropriateness and fostering creativity. Moreover, AEQES is a public sector agency which implies that the costs of the external reviews (experts’ fees, travel and accommodation costs) are paid by AEQES, not by the reviewed institutions.

AEQES is an active participant of the European higher education area. In 2011, it was reviewed by ENQA and gained full membership. In 2012, it registered with EQAR. The agency also takes part in two ENQA working groups (impact and excellence).

Presentation of CTI

CTI, established by French law in 1934, is a nonprofit organisation officially recognised as the independent body in charge of programme accreditation of engineering degrees in France.

CTI is composed of 32 members, appointed upon legislative order, coming from different origins (public and private higher education institutions, employer organisations, professional engineering associations and trade unions); it is thus an equitable organisation in terms of professional and academic participation.

Its missions are respectively: the evaluation and accreditation of programmes in the fields of engineering and applied sciences; the development of quality in engineering education; and the promotion of engineering curricula and careers in France and abroad.

Since 1997, all French engineering programmes must be periodically accredited every six years. Upon the result of CTI’s accreditation, the engineering higher education institutions are authorised (*habilitées*) by the French ministry to deliver a particular engineering degree (*Diplôme d’ingénieur*).

Upon demand of foreign institutions, CTI is also authorised by French law to accredit engineering programmes abroad. The result of this accreditation may, upon the request of the government concerned, result in “state admission” of these degrees by the French Government. Up to now, CTI has accredited engineering programmes belonging to ten institutions outside of France in six different countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, China, Vietnam and Switzerland) (French Republic Official Journal, 2013).

CTI is a full member of ENQA since 2005 and it is registered with EQAR since 2010. CTI is also a founding member of ENAEE (European Network for the Accreditation of Engineering Education) and is one of the agencies authorised to deliver the EUR-ACE label (a quality accreditation label for engineering programmes developed by ENAEE). CTI also participates in the work of ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation).

Description of the collaboration

Context

Since AEQES was created, all higher education programmes in the French Community of Belgium must be evaluated regularly; engineering programmes, planned in 2012-2013, are no exception. In October 2009, the universities concerned expressed their wish that AEQES establish a partnership with CTI in order to organise a joint mission with a twofold objective:

- the evaluation of the programmes in order to comply with the requirements established by the 2008 AEQES decree;
- the accreditation of the programmes according to CTI's accreditation criteria which would provide access to "admissions" of the programmes by the French Government and the EUR-ACE label.

The demand included five engineering programmes in the field of agronomic sciences and biological engineering and fifteen in the field of engineering sciences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Engineering programmes and number of students per programme delivered by HEIs in the French Community of Belgium (reference academic year: 2009-2010)

	ULg	UCL	ULB	UMons	Total
Sciences agronomiques et ingénierie biologique	684	659	314		1657
Bachelier en sciences de l'ingénieur (Bioingénieur)	493	486	229		1208
Master bioingénieur : sciences et technologies de l'environnement	61	48	33		142
Master bioingénieur : gestion des forêts et des espaces naturels	26	10			36
Master bioingénieur : sciences agronomiques	65	65	15		145
Master bioingénieur : chimie et bio-industries	39	50	37		126
Sciences de l'ingénieur (ingénieur civil)	853	1388	1000	724	3965
Bachelier en sciences de l'ingénieur (Ingénieur civil)	523	818	616	425	2382
Master ingénieur civil des mines et géologue	17			26	43
Master ingénieur civil en chimie et science des matériaux	17	58	23	18	116
Master ingénieur civil physicien	15	13	32		60
Master ingénieur civil électricien	33	42	40	59	174
Master ingénieur civil électromécanicien	33	65	50		148
Master ingénieur civil en aérospatiale	46				46
Master ingénieur civil mécanicien	25	79	47	54	205
Master ingénieur civil biomedical	21	13	23		57
Master ingénieur civil en informatique	22	39	39		100
Master ingénieur civil en informatique et gestion				83	83
Master ingénieur civil en mathématiques appliquées		58			58
Master ingénieur civil des constructions	49	68	49		166
Bachelier en sciences de l'ingénieur (Ingénieur civil architecte)	38	90	54	42	224
Master ingénieur civil architecte	14	45	27	17	103
TOTAL	1537	2047	1314	724	5622
Nombre de spécialités (bacheliers + masters)	18	17	15	8	59
Nombre de spécialités (masters)	15	14	12	6	48

As a result of this demand, AEQES established contact with CTI in December 2009 and a joint working group was created in order to organise collaboration.

Motivation

For the four universities concerned, combining a mandatory evaluation by AEQES with a voluntary accreditation process by CTI has represented, beyond the added value of international recognition, a gain of time and money. Indeed, the two agencies agreed that only one self-evaluation report and one site visit were necessary to meet both objectives. As to the financial aspect, the collaboration simply divided the price in two: with a mixed panel (see below), only the costs related to the CTI experts – i.e. fifty percent of the panel – were paid by the HEIs.

As to the motivation of AEQES, collaborating with a domain-specific agency provides a generalist agency with an asset in terms of expertise. In the meantime, AEQES has also started a collaboration with AEC (the European Association of Conservatoires, www.aec-music.eu/) for the upcoming evaluation of music programmes. The issue of analysing the degree of compatibility between the two approaches (evaluation and accreditation) was undoubtedly an additional factor of motivation.

Regarding CTI, as other previous international missions performed by the agency, this collaboration has provided the occasion to test the significance and applicability of CTI's accreditation framework outside France and to deliver the EUR-ACE label, and thus to expand and promote the EUR-ACE standards to FCB. Finally, from an internal point of view, this exercise has been an opportunity to perform a thorough benchmarking of CTI's methods and processes against a generalist assessment-oriented agency.

Phases of the collaboration

Preparatory phase

From December 2009 to January 2011, a preparatory phase allowed the two would-be partners to assess the feasibility of the collaboration and to agree on a set of common principles and a basic work framework.

A number of specific documents and procedures were developed, such as a common evaluation and accreditation framework.

At this stage of the collaboration, the feasibility study concerned three main issues: the compatibility of the two national quality assurance systems and the detection of possible legal and material barriers to the collaboration; the compatibility of evaluation/accreditation methods and procedures put in place by the two agencies and finally, a first diagnosis of the applicability of CTI's accreditation framework to engineering programmes in the FCB.

Overall, the two national legal frameworks posed no major barriers to the collaboration. However, one difficulty detected at this stage was the difference between the two periodic calendars. AEQES assesses programmes every ten years with a follow-up site visit every three years, whereas CTI's accreditation is performed every six years. This difficulty, which was not judged to be a major obstacle for this initial collaboration, will be addressed at a future stage.

Regarding the second issue, a number of work meetings were held in order to perform a comparative analysis of standards and procedures. Additionally, representatives of the two agencies were included as observers in a CTI and an AEQES site visit mission (observation visits). The procedures and methods of the two agencies were found to be globally compatible with regard to their principles and conception. However, during the observation visits, some implementation differences were detected: indeed, the dynamics and objectives of the HEI's self-evaluation phase, the balance between quantitative and qualitative criteria, the particular role of the panel members during the site visits or the attitude of the HEIs with regard to the assessment exercise are undoubtedly influenced by the fact that HEIs undergo an accreditation process (as opposed to going through an evaluation process in which no final yes/no decision is made). Being able to effectively combine the accountability and the quality enhancement approaches came up as one of the main challenges of this collaboration.

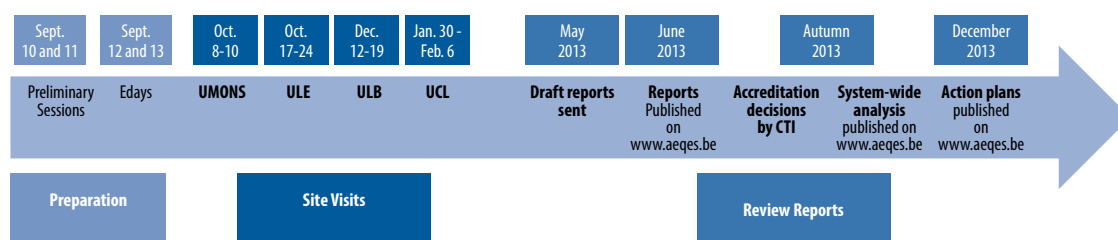
Finally, an initial diagnosis on the applicability of CTI's and EUR-ACE accreditation criteria (ENAAE, 2008) to engineering programmes in FCB was performed. Without anticipating the results of the accreditation, no prior incompatibilities were detected which could put the accreditation at risk.

After this preparatory phase, on 20 January 2011, a formal collaboration agreement (AEQES and CTI, 2011) was signed between the presidents of the two agencies.

Execution phase

The execution phase took place according to the timeline shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.



As a general principle, all stages of the joint mission (composition of the expert panel, site visits, production of reports) have been jointly managed by AEQES and CTI. AEQES has ensured the logistic coordination during the execution phase. Costs have been equally shared by the two agencies.

The execution phase has taken place according to the following principles:

- Composition of the expert panel:

A mixed team of experts was appointed jointly by the two agencies; this team respected AEQES and CTI minimum composition criteria: the academic/professional balance and the presence of a student (CTI); an expertise in science of education and in quality management by at least one panel member (AEQES). The expert panel was led by a president (AEQES) in charge of coordinating the evaluation process and a CTI member in order to ensure the link with the accreditation phase.

The whole panel of experts (a total of 32) was divided into a permanent team (the chair, the CTI rapporteurs, one expert of the profession, one educationalist and two students) and programme experts (who came on specific days only). In terms of nationality, the panel was composed of two Swiss, one Luxemburgish, eight Belgian (25%) and 21 French (> 65%) members.

- Site visits:

In each HEI, an evaluation visit of three to six days was organised, covering all engineering programmes involved to ensure coherence at the institutional level. The site visits took place between October 2012 and February 2013. A specific expert training session was organised prior to the visits (E-days).

To keep the site visits reasonable in terms of time and money, some interviews were conducted simultaneously (up to five parallel sessions); therefore, several debriefing sessions were needed to share the information among all panelists.

- Reports:

The following reports have been produced by the experts:

- A draft report, addressed to the HEIs in order to incorporate possible correction of any factual errors and/or observations about the content;
- The final review report, to be published at full length on the AEQES website (AEQES, 2013);
- The system-wide analysis, to be published on the AEQES website. This analysis consists of a contextualised presentation of the programmes and their prospects. This report also contains a

SWOT analysis of all reviewed programmes, along with a list of recommendations for improving overall quality (AEQES, 2013);

– An accreditation report containing the accreditation decisions and some final recommendations (published on CTI's website).

- Follow-up:

As a first step of the follow-up phase, six months after the publication of the review reports, AEQES published on its website the action plans elaborated and provided by each HEI. They describe how the assessed programmes are dealing with the recommendations and take action for improvement.

After the execution phase, an online questionnaire was addressed to the HEIs and the students involved in the reviews. The reflexions below take their responses into consideration.

Lessons learnt

The collaboration between an evaluation agency (AEQES) and an accreditation agency (CTI) has revealed to be an interesting exercise for both parties. This step-by-step, practical and detailed comparative analysis has undoubtedly built a space of trust and confidence between the two organisations, but has also raised several issues.

Institutional vs. programme assessment

The mission brought to surface the tension between specific-domain standards and institutional-oriented standards within the combined reference framework. As a matter of fact, finding the right balance remains a challenge.

This tension is evident from the institutions' side (some respondents judged the assessment as too institutional and not sufficiently programme-oriented), but also from the experts' side. As explained above, the expert panel was composed of permanent experts (present during the whole duration of the mission) and programme or domain experts (present at specific moments only). Some programme experts declared feeling "frustrated" regarding their limited role, as they would have liked to have a more global picture of the institution.

Attitudes and behaviour

In terms of attitudes and behaviour, it was noted (and revealed in the feedback) that, because an accreditation was at stake, the HEIs somehow took the whole process more seriously (the leadership seemed more engaged). Surprisingly, the trust and confidence that exists in a usual AEQES formative evaluation process (quality enhancement-oriented) was as much present here. The HEIs were very honest in their SER and during the interviews, maybe slightly more stressed and willing to comply with the experts' expectations.

In contrast, the accreditation objective did have an influence in the attitudes and behaviours of the experts.

The expert who evaluates tries to understand the HEI's situation ("tell me what you do and why you do so"), adopts a neutral stance and gives a mirror image; he stresses the possible contradictions between the intended objectives and the observed results and finally expresses rather systemic recommendations that lead the HEI to address some issues. The expert who accredits uses a more normative set of standards, conducts more inquisitive interviews and gives an opinion of (non) conformity against a model. His recommendations are more prescriptive and more focused on weaknesses. However, the more direct, frank and fixed tone they use may more firmly/brutally question the usual practices and lead to more radical changes: only time will tell.

Review reports

From a methodological point of view, the review reports turned out to have a double functionality: a global SWOT analysis followed by some recommendations for quality enhancement, and an additional document for CTI's accreditation purposes. As a consequence, the reports proved to be of considerable length (between 45 and 67 pages), and sometimes written in a judgmental tone. This caused some difficulties as AEQES wanted its reports, which were to be published, to be written in a style that would be less judgmental and more analytical. Furthermore, the excessive length of the reports led to long rights of reply and extra work for all (HEIs, experts and AEQES staff in treating them).

Scope of the accreditation

The deans' demand to obtain the "Diplôme d'ingénieur" through a global compliance with CTI's accreditation criteria as well as the EUR-ACE label, which requires compliance with the EUR-ACE set of standards, aroused confusion. Some feedback gave the impression that reviewers were making a comparison between the French model and the Belgian model (this suggested comparison was perceived as unpleasant by some respondents). In any case, a more international vision would have been welcomed in two ways: a more diverse panel in terms of nationality and a more international vision from the programme managers themselves. This would, in particular, ease the feeling expressed by some that "the French model was being imposed".

Some action lines

As a consequence of this meta-analysis, and in the perspective of a new collaboration between the two agencies for the joint assessment and accreditation of non-university (professional-oriented) engineering programmes, a number of action lines have been identified:

- The expertise panel should be more international. The difference between the EUR-ACE framework and the French framework should be further clarified.
- The expert training session should be reinforced, specifically regarding the expected attitudes and behaviour of the experts and the role of the domain experts.
- The form of the review report should be reviewed. Most probably, two reports (an assessment report by AEQES and an accreditation report by CTI) should be produced instead of just one review report.
- Finally, the follow-up processes of the two agencies should be phased in order to avoid the duplication of procedures. A number of possibilities are currently under revision.

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Students as external evaluators in peer-review based EQA: Five years of student participation in the Institutional Evaluation Programme

By Thérèse Zhang⁹

Student participation in quality assurance (QA) processes has been acknowledged in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) since 2005. A number of QA agencies across Europe have included students in their processes since then, and internal QA processes within higher education institutions (HEIs) also increasingly involve students. This paper aims to examine the practice of involving students as part of the evaluators' pool in the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP), where students have been present as peer team members for all evaluations since 2009.

For the purpose of this paper, student participation in IEP was examined through two surveys conducted among all past and present IEP student evaluators, and among a selection of members from the IEP pool of evaluators. The survey for students collected 29 answers,¹⁰ and the survey for pool members collected 36 answers.¹¹ In order to complement data obtained through these surveys, 12 phone interviews were conducted in July 2013: three with students, four with non-student pool members, and five¹² with institutions that had their last IEP evaluation between 2009 and 2012.

The following sections will provide a short description of IEP and the introduction of student participation; discuss how students are involved in practice and feedback on the existing practice; propose an assessment of impact based on feedback collected from students, other pool members and evaluated institutions; and finally reflect on lessons learnt so far.

IEP and the introduction of student participation

As an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA), IEP has provided external evaluation services to HEIs since 1994. IEP evaluates HEIs in the context of their specific goals and objectives with the aim of quality improvement. Following submission of a self-evaluation report, an evaluation team visits the institution twice. A final report is then written, communicated to the institution, and published.¹³

The evaluation methodology is based on a peer-review approach. In addition, all teams are truly European: they are typically composed of five members, all from different countries. The stability and diversity of the IEP pool is considered as one of IEP's biggest strengths. An IEP team includes a chair (former or current rector), team members (former or current rectors or vice-rectors, and one student in each team), and a

⁹ Programme Manager, European University Association

¹⁰ Out of 71 invited to respond.

¹¹ Out of 55 invited to respond. All were team chairs or coordinators. Two-thirds of all respondents participated in evaluations where no student was involved, thus being able to compare experiences (with and without student team members).

¹² Interviews were conducted with the liaison person at the time of the last IEP evaluation. They mostly provided their input as individuals having experienced the evaluation process. All the institutions interviewed were evaluated by IEP at least twice; four of them had at least one evaluation without any student on the team. It should be noted that three of these institutional representatives joined the IEP pool of evaluators after their institution's last evaluation, and were also able to contribute to this study by sharing their views as a pool member.

¹³ Further information on IEP can be found at www.eua.be/iep.

team coordinator (HE professional). IEP organises an annual training seminar for pool members that aims to provide the latest developments in European HE trends as well as stimulate team dynamics.

IEP is overseen by an independent Steering Committee, which includes a student member. The IEP secretariat runs daily activities.

As student participation in QA was increasingly discussed at European level, the SC started considering including students in the IEP evaluation teams in 2005/2006. Mixed opinions were expressed in the SC at that time: there were concerns related to students' lack of experience in university management, possibly challenging the usual team dynamics, as well as positive feelings for students bringing a complementary perspective.

Eventually, eight students participated in IEP evaluations during a pilot phase (2006-2008). The practice was monitored and assessed by the SC, and found positive enough to be extended to all IEP evaluations as from 2008/2009.

All students during the pilot phase were selected through the European Students' Union (ESU). Although the IEP SC first reserved the right to recruit student members also through other means, in 2008 it decided that students in IEP will be recruited, in the first instance, through ESU.

Students as evaluators in IEP: how it works in practice

In 2009, IEP and ESU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that defined the procedures related to student participation in IEP. In addition, both organisations agreed to appoint contact persons for maintaining active communication and organise a feedback meeting every year.

a. Student recruitment

Every year ESU launches a call for pre-selecting students, and nominates students for the upcoming evaluation round, following criteria provided by IEP and agreed by ESU. The IEP SC selects the students who will participate in the upcoming round from these nominations. The number of students selected varies every year depending on the number of evaluations. The typical criteria for nomination are: being a student; being active on a national level or on university governance bodies; and having the appropriate language skills (fluency in English). The nominations should also be balanced in terms of disciplines and geographic origins. Any adjustment to the criteria for the selection is discussed between ESU and IEP.

As demands for students in external evaluations (other than IEP) have arisen, ESU nowadays organises this pre-selection in the broader context of a recruitment for an ESU QA pool of students, with students who are knowledgeable on QA, receive regular training, and provide inputs for all QA-related matters where ESU is involved, including serving as trainers at national level and participating in external evaluations (such as for IEP). ESU recruits these students through a call sent to national student unions (NUS) but open to all through their website. An endorsement by a student union is preferable, although ESU may also consider applications and motivations without such endorsement. Students are nominated after having received a proper level of training.

About two thirds of all students who responded to the survey participated in two to four IEP evaluations. While in the first years each student typically participated in one evaluation, since 2011 students tend to participate in several consecutive evaluation rounds, and can be considered as already knowledgeable about the evaluation process and IEP methodology when starting a new evaluation.

The recruitment process for participating in IEP appeared clear to 76% of the student respondents to the survey, but to some students this did not necessarily mean that it was transparent. Students' opinions are mixed regarding the purpose of the recruitment process: some would have preferred a fully open process enabling more non-ESU students to participate, whereas others think it is important that the NUS decide who should participate; some believe that students should be selected based on their CV and motivation in QA only, whereas others see the process as deciding on who should "represent students in the evaluations".

b. Participation in the evaluations

Once all students participating in an evaluation round are confirmed, IEP is responsible for deciding the composition of evaluation teams. The IEP secretariat then starts liaising with students for planning purposes.

76% of students who answered the survey were satisfied with the institutions they were assigned to. They unanimously agreed that IEP provided learning possibilities, such as working with people from different backgrounds, sharpening their understanding of QA and the institution world beyond theoretical knowledge, and further appreciating the diversity and complexity within the European Higher Education Area. Students also felt that team dynamics allowed them to better grasp issues at stake within the institution as well as to form their own view.

90% of them also felt that, thanks to flexibility shown by HEIs, the teams and the IEP secretariat in scheduling the visits, it was not a problem to cope with IEP, including travelling for visits, and their other commitments. The most cited challenges, by both students and non-student pool members, are: adopting the right attitude and tone as an evaluator; conducting this exercise in English; participating in the drafting phase of the final evaluation report;¹⁴ and reaching a proper level of preparation before the visits.¹⁵

c. Training

Participation in the IEP annual training seminar is a prerequisite for participation in evaluation teams. Every year, a session is organised for newcomers participating in IEP for the first time. This session is designed to address all newcomers, based on the idea that students are equal members – although it is mostly attended by a majority of students, as IEP does not recruit non-student pool members every year.

When students first began to participate in IEP, some team coordinators or chairs offered mentoring, on an individual basis, by offering advice on how to behave as an evaluator, and showing availability for answering any questions. The practice progressively stopped because it was seen as more and more unnecessary. However, the pilot phase showed that specific needs could be addressed, such as an overview on governance and funding, and briefing on being an external evaluator (confidentiality issues, refraining from meeting students without the rest of the team being present and using the opportunity of the site visits to promote policy issues, ...). Until now the session for newcomers has covered these issues for all newcomers, and feedback about this training being too short and content being too packed could be heard. Whether students would need more or specific training is still debated. Some students would like to have special foci on unfamiliar issues such as governance, or specific skills that students could master less easily (how to ask questions, how to move from data examination to recommendations – all issues which non-student newcomers could also benefit from learning about). Other students would prefer that training be kept the same for all newcomers out of the principle of not flagging out students as "weaker" newcomers.

¹⁴ Only 60% of student respondents to the survey think that student contribution had an influence on the preparation and drafting of the final evaluation reports.

¹⁵ In understanding the country background and challenges related to topics such as governance, and in getting prepared as a team.

Despite mixed opinions on possible improvement, almost all students who answered the survey were satisfied with the training and information provided at the annual seminar, and with how trainings provided by IEP and the ESU QA pool complement each other.¹⁶

d. Student participation in the management of the Programme

Since 2009, the IEP SC has included a student, appointed by the SC based on an ESU proposal of three student candidates. Candidates must be part of the pool at the time of the appointment or have been part of the pool the year before, and must be enrolled as a student in a European university during his/her term. The student is appointed for a two-year term.

Two students have participated in the IEP SC so far. Both felt welcome when they started their mandate, although they would have liked to receive more information on the history of IEP and ongoing debates before starting. They also felt that they acted and contributed as any other SC member, and that the student in the SC represents the student view within the pool, not ESU as such.

Impact of the practice: feedback from the field

a. Impact within the evaluated institutions

A majority of evaluated institutions and non-student pool members believe that student participation in IEP does make a difference for the evaluated institution, but responses differ when asked why. Some consider that the team becomes closer to the students' views and students within the institution under evaluation can identify themselves with someone in the team – thus making the IEP process a “real” peer-review including all constituencies of a HEI. Others felt that the general atmosphere was made less formal by the presence of the students. Interestingly, three out of five institutions interviewed related student participation as external evaluators to an opportunity for enhancing student participation in their own governance structures, and in the institution's life at large. One institution stated that it may have changed things in a situation where students were feeling that they could not influence things. All evaluated institutions understood that by including a student, IEP also communicates its belief that students should be full and active members of a university community.

In terms of influence on the content of the evaluation, opinions are mixed. Institutions mostly felt that there could have been an impact, if there were areas in which, for various reasons, students at the institution had concerns and could not formulate them in an appropriate way. Apart from this, the evaluated institutions could not really define a specific impact from the student's presence.

b. Impact on team dynamics

Students were satisfied with their role as a team member within the team (83.6%): they felt welcome and felt the team acted in a collegial way. This is mutual: other pool members see students as integrated as any other team member (97%). Students who participated during the early years saw the practice as a positive learning process for other IEP pool members. However, several interviewees thought that some students felt the need to “over-prove” themselves, and show that they do have experience in QA and are able to address the task, more than a new non-student team member would do.

All pool members acknowledged that team dynamics vary depending on each evaluation, individual attitudes, and the composition of the team. However, the role of the chair, and to a lesser extent the

¹⁶ It should be noted that the ESU training for its QA pool of students includes issues related to the attitude of an evaluator: not overwhelm the institution with one's own institutional experience, introduction to common work practices such as how to exchange business cards in an appropriate way, etc.

coordinator, was constantly underlined by all as fundamental for the quality and dynamics of team work during the evaluation. Also, students were very much aware that their role mostly depends on how they would contribute. Other pool members noticed that most students they met in their teams were well prepared. A few of them also pointed out the difference between students with a policy agenda and others, who could relate more easily to the students met in the institution.

c. Impact on the IEP evaluation process

Whilst the IEP policy is that students should be regarded as any other regular team member, there seem to be, among non-student pool members, two different ways of envisaging their contribution in the evaluation process. On the one hand, students are considered as good contributors for addressing specific student-related issues and/or interviewing students: 97% of non-student pool members who answered the survey agreed that having a student in the team was an asset for this purpose. About 85% of students believed that their participation has influenced the way to address student-specific issues, and interviewing students during the visits. Also, non-student pool members noticed a tendency for the students to focus on these, especially if they are pushed into that role.¹⁷

On the other hand, it was felt more and more by non-student pool members that students should provide input for all areas, not only for teaching and learning or student welfare. However, in the current situation, it was not found obvious whether having a student in the team was an asset when interviewing other university representatives or stakeholders, and if student input during team discussions was useful when discussing non-student specific issues: 51.4% of non-student pool members answered that it was useful, 34.3% answered maybe, and the others found it not useful. Students were also less convinced by their own contribution for addressing non-student specific issues or interviewing other representatives during the visit: only 65% believe that students contribute to these matters. Further encouragement and support may be needed for fostering their participation in areas such as governance, funding, or research.

This difference in interpretation of the student's role, which can be found among students as well as other pool members, may lead to confusion as to what should be expected from the student member of a team. Some students expressed that they felt insecure about their role, or how they should relate to the other team members.

Nevertheless, the benefits of student participation were clear to both students and other pool members: providing a new and complementary insight or perspective into topics that would have been addressed anyway.¹⁸ Other than that, most non-student pool members did not see a difference between the students and other team members for aspects related to the evaluation process.¹⁹ Here again, it was pointed out as mostly depending on individual attitudes, as for any other team member. Contribution to the interviews during the visits was however seen as more complicated than for other team members by 31% of respondents. Although many believed that student participation has contributed to improving IEP in general, it was also specified that it most probably did not change the IEP core philosophy or methodology.

Lessons learnt and food for thought: ways forward

The inclusion of students as evaluators should undoubtedly be related to students being recognised and valued as active university community members. Student participation as a way to enhance students' active role in internal QA and governance of HEIs appears as the most noticeable impact of the practice.

¹⁷ It should be noted that some students do believe that "higher education is and should be primarily about learning" and the evaluated HEIs are concentrating too much on research, at the detriment of educational issues.

¹⁸ A few students commented in this regard that they were positively surprised by how much other team members knew about student-related issues.

¹⁹ Such as motivation and commitment, responsiveness to emails and requests, agenda availabilities for scheduling the visits, contribution to team discussions during the visits and during the drafting phase of the report.

This impact would gain from being further analysed: has it changed the HEIs' approach to student-oriented learning, or helped the student community to take ownership of the outcomes from any QA process, thus contributing to build up a quality culture in the evaluated institutions?

A possible way to improve conditions of student participation would consist of improving the students' and their team-mates' understanding of what the student's role should be. This would involve clarifying whether, and how, students are expected to contribute in areas where they would not tend to be active, as well as encouraging them to ask questions in these areas. The role of the chair in terms of team dynamics is crucial for clarifying this point at the beginning of an evaluation process. A clearer and common communication by IEP and ESU on what the recruitment process aims to achieve and what is expected from the students in the evaluations could also make a useful contribution in this regard.

In addition, support to student participation could be reinforced. Beyond the question of further emphasis on the training for all newcomers to IEP, team coordinators could help to better address the challenge of adopting the right attitude as an evaluator, by showing availability in case questions arise during the visits. Additional training for team coordinators, in order to allow them to offer such support, could be envisaged. ESU should certainly be encouraged to continue training students on how to behave as an evaluator. Thorough preparatory meetings where the team discusses the structure of the visit, the distribution of roles, and the objectives and expectations from each meeting, even if they seem obvious to more experienced team members, would also help to gain more confidence for the upcoming process.

Finally, as one student put it, participation in IEP benefited the mutual understanding between EUA and ESU regarding student participation in QA – and this would certainly not be the least achievement if it has contributed to open perspectives on students as stakeholders.

Meaning, motivation and learning: Factors for educational quality at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology

By Eli Fyhn Ullern²⁰

Introduction

In February 2013 the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, published their evaluation of the quality assurance system at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU. The report presented significant deficiencies in the university quality assurance system. The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) has 22,000 students studying a wide range of disciplines in several different faculties. The university is highly esteemed and renowned for educating the nation's future engineers and scientists. The university also has strong programmes in the social sciences, education, the arts and humanities, medicine, architecture and the fine arts (NTNU, 2014).

For the past two years working as a student representative I have become interested in how NTNU can reach its strategic goals of educational quality and use the quality assurance system to enhance educational quality. This interest influenced my studies in political science at NTNU and became the subject of my Bachelor thesis in May 2013. The present case study is based on interviews with leaders of educational quality at NTNU and documental studies of strategy and the quality assurance system. In my case study I asked: How can a report from the Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, influence the quality work at NTNU? What are important factors for the formulation of strategic initiatives for educational quality at NTNU?

What is educational quality?

The use of the term *quality* in governmental documents has increased. The work on quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) should be seen within the context of quality work in the public sector more generally. It could also be seen as a consequence of the interest in New Public Management and goal-oriented management since the 1980s (Michelsen and Høst, 2012). There are several studies on the national governance of HEIs in Norway, but very few are taking a closer look at the individual institutions. Former studies have shown that success with quality work is associated with the work being firmly rooted in the organisation (Stensaker, 2000). Therefore my main goal was to find out what should be the basis for quality work at NTNU in order to take quality forward.

Educational quality is often used as a term in strategies and management documents at higher educational institutions. However, few define *what* educational quality is. My presumption is that how we evaluate quality and how we ensure quality is closely related to our understanding of the term.

National reports have introduced different approaches to educational quality (NOU, 2000, p.14). NOKUT has defined educational quality as the facilitation of students' learning and students' learning outcomes (Mørland, 2012). Hackmann and Wagemann (1995) point out that an overall definition of educational quality does not exist. But without relating educational quality to something or someone, it is not a meaningful term (Michelsen and Høst, 2012). Before any meaningful quality work can be done, the term therefore has to be defined. Only in this way can the institutions understand what it is they are striving to achieve.

NOKUT is evaluating each individual quality assurance system at least every six years. The evaluation shall be made on the basis of whether the system is comprehensive and rooted in the institution's management, and whether it provides information that is analysed and communicated to those responsible. Moreover, whether knowledge is the basis for action aimed at improvement and development. The reviews that do not approve the quality assurance system give the educational institutions six months to correct the deficiencies before reconsideration (NOKUT, 2013).

How a national report influences internal quality work

After receiving NOKUT's report, NTNU made a statement to the media with the following quote: "We know that education at NTNU is of high quality, but we have not been good enough to systematize procedures to ensure that quality deviations are detected and corrected at every stage" (NTNU, 2013c). NOKUT does not examine the quality of the institutions, but how institutions systematically ensure quality. Hence, NTNU alone is responsible for creating a quality assurance system that can be used as a tool to improve the education they provide. This systematic work seems to be a challenge at NTNU. In the past months, there have been two important questions for further quality work: How can NTNU ensure quality if they do not have a well-functioning quality assurance system? And perhaps even more important: How can NTNU work strategically to enhance educational quality if they do not know what to improve?

The report has been followed by a greater awareness about quality work in the organisation. A potential outcome of greater awareness in the organisation could be a broader involvement from stakeholders in the organisation. NTNU's quality assurance system is developed from the institution's past experience and from national criteria. The Board of NTNU has the overall responsibility for the system, which is intended to be a tool for achieving the goals of quality education as outlined in NTNU's strategy (NTNU, 2012). However, to ensure educational quality different organisational levels of the organisation need to be involved and engage in order to take quality forward. What factors are important in order to succeed with quality work at NTNU?

Important factors for strategic initiatives at NTNU

The creation of meaningful quality assurance systems for educational institutions requires the involvement of academic staff both in design and implementation, recent case studies show (Stensaker, 2000). Whilst several educational institutions in Norway did not include academic staff, NTNU had a group of different stakeholders from the university involved in creating their quality assurance system (Stensaker, 2006). NTNU's description of educational quality states: "The main goal of NTNU's quality work is the improvement of teaching and learning." It is followed by a list of four points for what to do in terms of measures of educational quality: 1) All courses and programmes shall be evaluated and developed continuously, 2) Duties and responsibilities in quality work should be clearly defined and communicated to both employees and students, 3) Quality work should be followed by measures to

further develop the quality of education, 4) Documentation of quality work should be available to those concerned (NTNU, 2013b). Neither NTNU's strategy nor the quality assurance system of education gives any definition of educational quality. The main focus is on *what* should be done to ensure that quality exists and *how* this should be done.

Meaning

Educational quality is a term used in both strategy and quality assurance systems, but the lack of content makes it difficult to know what the term means. There is also a lack of content at the national level, where the politicians have been careful not to define education quality. On the other hand, the national agency, NOKUT, evaluates whether the institutions are doing systematic work to ensure educational quality. Could this sharing of management between the national level and institutional autonomy account for the university's failure to clarify a definition of educational quality? A previous study of quality assurance systems at the major educational institutions in Norway showed that those who had succeeded best in demonstrating quality improvement within the organisation had managed to link quality improvement with institutional characteristics. The study also showed that those who had managed to define quality were more successful in providing direction for the quality work (Stensaker, 2000). Therefore, the institution's own characteristics should be used as a basis when educational quality is defined. This is mentioned as one of the main challenges when working with quality at NTNU. Furthermore, by defining educational quality on the basis of NTNU's characteristics, the organisation is likely to obtain ownership of the concept. Could this be a successful way to motivate all levels of the organisation to engage in quality work?

The first challenge at NTNU is to create a meaningful quality assurance system. The system can be seen as a tool for control rather than a tool for strategic development. Proximity and understanding of the system appears to be an important factor in creating meaning among academic employees. Academic employees are an important part of the organisation, since they act as mediators both from department to students and students to department. Making sense of the system is an important factor for the quality work of the organisation, but beyond understanding what to change, there must be an understanding of why quality assurance is important in order to take quality forward.

Motivation

The Board has the overall responsibility for quality assurance at NTNU, but the responsibility for the system to be adapted and adopted follows the line with responsibility through rector, deans and department heads. From heads of departments, the road continues to the academic employees. It is not the number of processes, systems and strategies that are essential if management and employees do not see the value and benefits of working systematically with quality. In order to reach strategic goals, there must be a motivation for the development of the organisation (Mikalsen, 1997). For many, writing reports and being monitored are not experienced as meaningful and motivating (*ibid.*). How can NTNU develop measures that both meet the national requirements for a quality assurance system and at the same time create commitment and understanding within the organisation?

Employees often ask why they should engage in quality work. An important answer may be that quality work provides a basis for improvement of the organisation and learning about organisational development ensures consistent quality improvement (*ibid.*). Quality work, however, requires a broad involvement of all employees in the organisation (*ibid.*). Responsibility for the adaptation and implementation of a quality assurance system lies with the leaders of the organisation. This responsibility includes motivating employees. How does NTNU ensure the engagement of the organisation in quality work? In August 2013

the organisation experienced a change of leadership in most of its parts. Guidance and training in the quality assurance system for department heads is an important element for a system that is firmly rooted in the organisation.

Although the leaders are responsible for the quality assurance system, the whole organisation should be more active in the design of measures. This allows more of the organisation to identify with initiatives, and the possibilities of integrating measures are larger (Funnel and Rogers, 2011). A study where NTNU was compared with other educational institutions in the late 1990s showed that NTNU's focus on educational quality as a tool for change tended to be seen as an administrative matter, and that there was a desire for efficiency behind quality improvement (Stensaker, 2000). It would appear that there is a need to communicate the academic development potential within and as a result of the quality assurance system. The system should not be a system merely for control. This may especially be important in periods when an organisation is experiencing changes (Mikalsen, 1997, p. 12).

I have now mentioned meaning and motivation as two factors for the development of strategic initiatives for quality improvement. The third factor I have found is the need for a quality assurance system that encourages learning in the organisation. How can NTNU utilise both the external report from NOKUT and internal reports for quality improvement? There is a need to understand what to improve and why, before one can use a quality assurance system as an arena for learning in the organisation. Only then will anyone be able to formulate strategic measures that point out how quality improvement can and should be done. The last question will be discussed in the next sections.

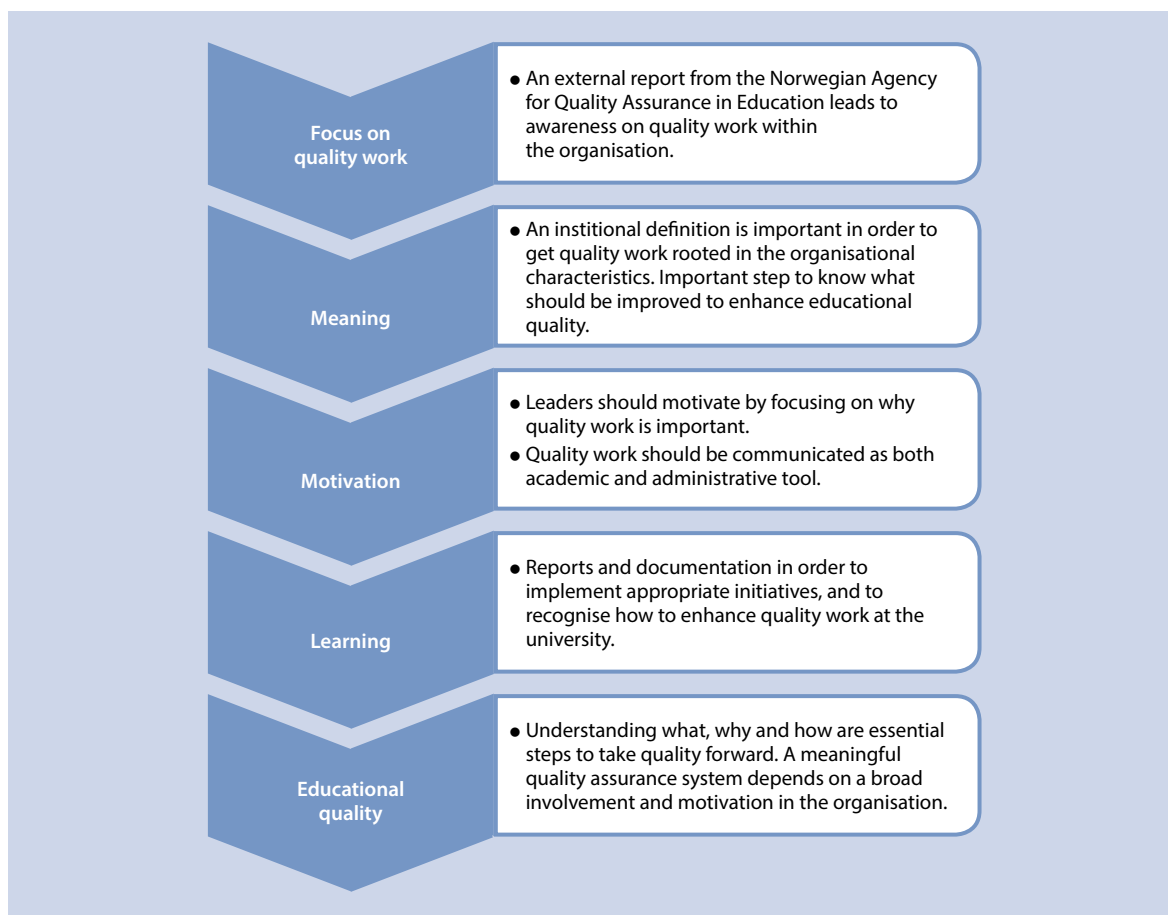
Learning

“The goal of reporting and documentation is to provide a sound basis for implementing appropriate initiatives” (NTNU, 2011, p. 5). How does NTNU create a quality assurance system that is understood and used as a tool for organisational learning? Reports are essential for recognising differences and progress. They can also be seen as information that can be used in the design of new measures. This is also supported by Deming (1982) who believes that an organisation should use statistical analysis to gain knowledge about itself and to optimise processes. The quality assurance system should act as such a tool to assess the quality and obtain knowledge of education at the institution (NOKUT, 2013). However, it should also be used to identify what works well. A well-functioning quality assurance system is created in an organisation that understands the meaning of the system and which is motivated to use the quality assurance system as a tool for strategic development. In this way, learning in the quality assurance leads the organisation to recognise improvement and variance.

Model for meaning, motivation and learning

Meaning, motivation and learning seem to be three key factors for the formulation of strategic measures. I have therefore developed a step-by-step model that examines the various factors that may be important to realise the strategic goals of educational quality at the university. The model presents factors that can contribute to organisational learning, through becoming more aware of the institution's abilities.

Model for meaning, motivation and learning (MML-model)



Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, meaning, motivation and learning are three factors that must be present and rooted in the organisation for the strategic initiatives for educational quality at the university. It is too early to say what effect the NOKUT report will have, but it has led to an awareness of educational quality in the organisation. This awareness should be used strategically.

Awareness of quality in the organisation is an important starting point for the enhancement of educational quality and a well-functioning quality assurance system. In order to make sense of quality work, it is important that NTNU make a definition of educational quality which is rooted in institutional characteristics. There is a need for measures that create motivation for quality work. This point is closely related to the point of a meaningful quality assurance system, but still adds a more proactive approach to quality work. The organisation must first understand the meaning of educational quality and what the term implies, and then focus on why quality work is important. Strategic initiatives at NTNU should have an academic as much as an administrative focus. It seems that quality work is easily perceived as control, rather than something that makes sense and creates motivation. Leaders at NTNU have a central role and responsibility to encourage quality work. The last point involves how quality work can be rooted as a strategic tool for improvement. When you manage to create meaning and motivation in the quality assurance system, this system will be a useful tool both to detect deviations and development. Without a functioning quality assurance system, it is difficult to identify this. The quality assurance system should be used as an opportunity for learning within the organisation – and to build on the factors one sees that promote quality.

Meaning, motivation and learning are put into a step-by-step model that suggests how measures can be designed in order to achieve the strategic goals of quality. My assumption is that this model does not solve the challenges of quality work, but that these factors will affect the success of the work in designing and realising measures of educational quality at NTNU.

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Dealing with engagement issues – an examination of professionals’ opinions on stakeholder involvement in quality assurance

By Oliver Vettori²¹ and Tia Loukkola²²

Introduction

From a certain perspective, quality assurance (QA) in higher education seems to be an overwhelming success story. In 2008, an OECD publication declared the development of external QA systems one of the most important trends in higher education in the last decades (cf. Riegler, 2010, p. 157). EUA's Trends 2010 report shows that for more than 60% of the surveyed institutions, the implementation of internal QA counts as one of the most important changes of the last ten years (Surssock & Smidt, 2010). And Loukkola & Zhang (2010) found a considerable trend towards institutional QA systems since 2005, with more than 80% of the surveyed institutions having had developed such systems by 2010.

Yet, such developments resonate far less with some of the key stakeholders who are intended to benefit from and/or contribute to the institutional QA systems. Criticised as being overly managerial and formalistic, QA is often met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm from most academics (cf. Anderson, 2006; Newton 2002; 2000). From this perspective, QA is very much perceived as an externally imposed burden that seems to be more about window-dressing and “feeding the beast” (Newton, 2002) of bureaucracy than about achieving the kind of excellence in teaching or even “transformative learning” (Harvey & Knight, 1996) the approaches are supposedly aiming for. In essence, QA is very much a contested issue, with different perspectives, normative ideals and interpretive patterns on the nature of quality and the functions of QA competing and sometimes conflicting with each other (cf. Vettori, 2012a).

By complementing the structural dimension of QA (i.e. quality management handbooks, process descriptions and typical QA instruments such as surveys) with the dimension of values of an organisation – relating to the commitment of its members, the underlying values, skills and attitudes (Ehlers, 2009, p. 346) – frameworks such as the quality culture concept promoted by the European University Association (EUA) attempt to respond to the concerns of the academic community. In essence, the concept of quality culture is highly political, carrying the hopes of policy makers, university leaders and QA officers alike that it may somehow reframe QA as a core value of higher education institutions instead of an externally imposed chore (Vettori, 2012a, p. 28). In the EUA's quality culture concept, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e.g. by considering the subcultures in the respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership is necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place (cf. Vettori *et al.*, 2007, p. 22).

Dealing with engagement issues

Even though the concept's focus on communication, participation and trust offers – at least in theory – a much more attractive “entry point” for key stakeholder groups such as the academic staff and the students, it still does not offer practical solutions on how these stakeholder groups could actually be enticed to “enter” the field. In other words, one of the strengths of the quality culture concept is that it places utmost importance on stakeholder participation in quality assurance, yet it also draws attention to the question of how this participation can actually be achieved – not least as there do not seem to be ready-made solutions for actually achieving a desired level of participation. How can we find ways of encouraging the key actors (and supposed beneficiaries) of institutional quality assurance processes to participate in the development of these processes while avoiding the pitfall of enforcing their involvement? How can we reach a “shared understanding” of quality assurance that is not just a euphemism for every actor being able to recite the European Standards & Guidelines? How can students and academics be assisted in finding meaning in daily QA routines – and even help to improve them?

Such questions were at the heart of a series of workshops conducted in the context of the European project “Promoting quality culture in higher education institutions” (PQC), coordinated by EUA in partnership with the European Association for QA in Higher Education (ENQA), the University of Duisburg-Essen, the University of Lisbon and the University of Zagreb. Bringing together more than 60 QA professionals from universities all over Europe, the workshops focused on sharing experiences and ideas on how to incentivise all internal stakeholders (most notably students, academic and administrative staff) to get actively involved in the development of the institutional quality cultures.

In this paper, we are drawing on the discussions in these workshops and basing them around three central issues that seem to be pivotal for strengthening participatory structures: ownership, sense-making and communication. However, it should be noted that the ideas being presented in this paper do not constitute an official project report, but rather an analytical re-organisation of recurring themes in the workshop discussions. The aspects and recommendations, which were analytically and interpretatively derived from these discussions, are further complemented by insights from current literature on QA and evaluation theory and the authors' own professional experience in the field.

The ownership issue

“A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organisation, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality”. This quote by Crosby (1986 cited in Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 16) neatly sums up the main idea of the stakeholders' role in a joint quality culture. Within a functioning quality culture every actor is working towards the same goal, and the QA officers are merely moderating the relevant processes instead of being the only ones feeling obliged to keep them alive. The workshops, however, soon uncovered a major flaw in the way most QA systems are designed. In spite of all ambitions to reframe QA as a core value of higher education institutions instead of an enforced chore, the top-down implementation logic inherent in most QA activities usually means that all stakeholders enact (and thus potentially reject) an externally imposed “script”. By the time students and academics are invited to engage themselves and to “take responsibility”, most parameters are usually set and responsibility is rather assigned or delegated than allowed to be taken. The same analogy applies to university leadership as well: they may also feel as if the external QA requirements are imposed on them rather than being in charge of developing institutional QA systems that genuinely would serve their needs and thus can demonstrate a lack of commitment.

In other words, the stakeholders are required to engage themselves in processes (or are even made responsible for their outcomes), which they do not own – or at least do not feel as if they did. The idea

of collegiate feedback can thus get quickly subverted, once it becomes a formal process that is defined, implemented and maybe even controlled by the QA office. Creating such a sense of ownership, on the other hand, is not as easy as it may sound. Most guidelines (and external assessment criteria) for QA systems require clear and formal roles and responsibilities as well as standardised process descriptions. Even if every academic was left to his/her own ideas of how to ensure the quality of his/her own teaching and research, the institution would still need to come up with a meta-process to ensure that everyone is fulfilling the same minimum standards or at least is transparent enough in what they do. Making everyone an owner of his/her own performance monitoring, however, seems downright impossible.

The workshops showed that representative structures (with QA boards and curriculum committees that do not only enact procedures but have the freedom to define them) might be at least a partial solution to this problem. With student and academic staff representatives sitting in the steering groups that define the main parameters of a system and its core processes and criteria and monitor the effectiveness of such efforts, the stakeholder groups are at least formally involved in a way that signals ownership for the system. Nonetheless, higher education institutions usually consist of highly individualised and loosely coupled experts (cf. Pellert, 1999). Thus, taking the ownership idea to the level of the individual actor might well require that the different actors are challenged as well as enabled to formulate their own goals and to develop their own activities within a shared framework. This would also require taking responsibility for the consequences as well as knowing that within a quality culture approach shared responsibilities also means shared opportunities and risks.

The sense-making issue

When taking a close look at the workshop discussions on the potential lack of stakeholder engagement and actors' reluctance towards QA, it soon becomes clear that the problem is not that people object to the key idea as such. Hardly anyone ever argues against quality and improvement. This is strongly mirrored in the scholarly discourse – quality improvement appears as a generally desirable objective, with even cost-arguments seeming to be eclipsed by the concept's universal radiance (cf. Blackmur, 2007). In a way, improvement is arguably the most accepted among the different functions of QA, possibly because "it is [...] seen as being relatively unthreatening to, and by, the academic community" (Williams, 2009, p. 52f). And yet, most QA policies and processes seem to be unable to build upon such positive connotations and shed the image of a bureaucratic burden that hardly adds any value to the lives of students and academics.

During the workshops, several possible reasons were discussed, yet many of them led to the same conclusion: the language of the profession plays a pivotal role. Policy documents developed on a national or even European level are "adopted", yet hardly ever translated and specified for the needs of a particular institution and the actors within often underlining the accountability function of QA. In addition, many attempts to engage internal stakeholders in the QA processes draw on technical terms and concepts that are hardly a part of their usual environment and hold little relevance for them. The underlying assumption seems to be that every actor needs to know how the system works and is able to name its components (as an indicator for his/her "engagement"), but this assumption is very likely to thwart the actual goal of bringing people together in an attempt to change for the better. Further, it was found that even seemingly "harmless" terms and expressions that are part of the stock vocabulary of any QA officer can be interpreted in a way that is causing rejection rather than acceptance. The much favoured practice of identifying and disseminating "good practices" or even "best practices" often overlooks the normative connotations that come with this label. A "best practice" usually sets an example to be followed, yet at least semantically ignores that other practices might be at least equally effective and that they could also be equally valued by the institution. Consequently, framing activities as "best practices" can potentially even discourage people from participating in these model activities.

Overall, the norms that are encoded in various QA policies and processes are a particularly important yet sensitive aspect, which too often might get overlooked. As with any construct that is bound to values, it is highly unlikely that the same normative ideal manifesting in a specific QA activity would appeal to every institution and actor. In other words, something that is viewed as an improvement by a student can be regarded as a change for the worse by a teacher and vice versa. Key factors in this regard are the patterns of explanation and interpretation that prevail in a certain organisational context (see also Vettori, 2012b). Influencing these patterns and helping different actors to make sense of the logics that influence themselves and others might – at least in a long-term perspective – constitute a step forward towards “shared understandings” that fuel the quality culture. In this regard, the QA professionals might find it useful to use alternative evaluation approaches (such as Fourth Generation Evaluation, cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that pay particular attention to investigating and negotiating the different perspectives and constructions involved in QA, and thus favour sense-making over measurable results.

The communication issue

The fact that the QA professionals participating in the workshops continuously emphasised the importance of communication is hardly surprising in itself. Every organisation relies on communication as well as on building trust, and participation through regular stakeholder communication is one of the fundamental principles in EUA’s quality culture concept (cf. EUA, 2006; 2005). However, the workshops soon revealed that while this principle may be understood in theory, it is all too often ignored in daily practice. It seems that the dominant communication model is still to simply transmit information from sender to receiver (such as in the Shannon-Weaver-Model (1949)) instead of a two-way process of generating and negotiating meaning (and consequently assisting people in their sense-making efforts, see above). On the surface, most QA systems emphasise the importance of feedback cycles and stakeholder involvement, yet when taking a closer look, the flow of communication indeed goes only one way. Students and graduates, for example, fill in surveys and thus provide feedback on certain occurrences, yet the loop is seldom closed in a way that makes transparent how this feedback was dealt with (cf. Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). Even the academic staff – who are the primary addressees of QA’s favourite instrument, i.e. the omnipresent course evaluation questionnaires – rarely know what is being done with the data; or what they are supposed to do with it. Having open discussions on the value and impact of stakeholder feedback seems even more essential, because acting on feedback received is not as easy and unidirectional in practice as the political and managerial models imply. Most feedback is contradictory and does not offer clear and precise information on the causes of a problem or the potential solutions and thus needs to be interpreted and – in terms of the measures to be taken – even negotiated. The workshops therefore discussed a number of recommendations on how feedback and survey data could be used as the starting point of a communication process instead of its result, e.g. by regularly interpreting survey results among different stakeholders or institutional workshop series.

It also needs to be taken into account that communications can hardly be fully managed or controlled – information is not necessarily interpreted in the way the communicator intends it to be. Even communication channels are usually charged with meaning and are often treated accordingly. For example, the latest QA achievements in the institution’s newsletter might arouse the interest of external stakeholders, but can also lead to the internal view that this is just “another marketing trick”. Even the language that is used makes a significant difference. Whether an activity is framed as a “developmental talk” or an “annual performance appraisal” makes a huge difference, and launching a new process as “a necessary new QA instrument” signals something completely different than calling it “a way of making the curricula development process more efficient”.

Conclusions: overcoming engagement issues?

The three aspects of participative quality cultures discussed in this paper – ownership, sense-making and communication – appear to be key issues when discussing how to engage the internal stakeholder in order to work together for a common good. In this paper we have made an attempt to address them separately to some extent to give each of them the weight they deserve. In daily practice, however, they seem to be and should be intrinsically interlinked, which makes them impossible to tackle in complete isolation.

Consequently, the practical proposals made above are also related to more than one single aspect. Summarising these proposals, we come up with the following suggestions that could be considered when developing an institutional QA system that should include rather than exclude people:

- Set in place representative structures that are given a role and encouraged to take the lead in defining QA system's characteristics
- Step into a real dialogue with the actors and make them aware of the different perspectives they are bringing to the table
- Revise the language used when presenting and discussing QA and try to translate concepts into the daily language and relevance structures of the actors that are meant to be addressed
- Let the actors contribute in those areas where they are already versatile (e.g. not everyone needs to know the technical components of the QA system by heart).

Based on the discussions with the QA practitioners, it seems obvious that the success of QA officers in their capacity to foster quality culture is directly linked to developing QA adapted to the respective institution thus being able to take a step back from the formalistic requirements of external QA (while taking them into consideration) and being associated with their academic community. In this context, keeping in mind the different roles of a QA officer identified by Surssock (2011) – support and expertise, coordination, interpretation, monitoring, administration – may provide an interesting framework for re-considering the relationship between QA officers and the rest of the institutional community. Ultimately, the key to success in engaging stakeholders in the internal QA system might ironically lie in avoiding framing it like this – even for the “architects” of the QA system themselves.

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Engagement, empowerment, ownership – How to nurture the quality culture in higher education

By Anca Greere²³ and Catherine Riley²⁴

Introduction

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) issued by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2009) set the framework for quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area. The ESG make a clear distinction between institutional, i.e. internal, QA mechanisms and agency-based, i.e. external, QA criteria, benchmarks often viewed as the lowest level of expectation which needs to be met by an institution. Hence, external criteria, even though constraining in essence due to their compulsory nature, are set at a minimum level, with institutions at liberty to develop their own particular QA strategies and to design their own specific mechanisms and methodologies to demonstrate (how well) they comply with external criteria. In practice, internal QA practices often exceed external expectations and become models of good/best practice for others to emulate. Once such practices become embedded in the sector, the QA yardstick is set higher, with more rigorous and comprehensive criteria representing the pass level of compliance. More ambitious and competitive institutions will rise to the challenge and further develop such mechanisms which have all the hallmarks of good practice. Thus, the quality cycle with its predominantly analytical and reflective character (see LANQUA Quality Model) becomes a virtual spiral moving to a higher level with each cycle of development.

Understandably, higher education institutions differ greatly, in terms of size, audience, mission, location, ambitions etc. Subsequently, institutions adjust their QA policies/strategies/mechanisms to cater to their own needs. However, as long as there is a level of convergence between internal and external QA mechanisms, institutions are at liberty to take ownership of quality assurance and enhancement processes. How much of this ownership is then passed on to the stakeholders “on the ground”, and how great their involvement in and contribution to the processes will depend largely on institutional policy.

In what follows we propose to make use of data collected during the SPEAQ LLP Erasmus project (“Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality”) by nine institutional partners from the following countries: UK, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Spain. In 2011-2012, project partners organised data collection activities such as workshops, focus groups, interviews where main actors came together to discuss quality issues, identify critical areas and make proposals for actions. Our aims are to summarise common key areas of concern for students, teaching staff and quality managers, and to detail the level of involvement of the three stakeholder categories in identifying and meeting these challenges, and the positive outcomes which go beyond individual contributions to QA processes and extend into institutional benefits.

This approach identifies quality-related needs on the ground and encourages stakeholders to take quality into their own hands and develop and implement their own initiatives by engaging them as full participants in the quality assurance cycle. A chain reaction is thus triggered: stakeholders are consulted, separately and collectively, to provide opinions, to share views, to voice concerns and make proposals, and also to shape them into initiatives that can be implemented at course, department or institutional levels. Stakeholders are thus given the lead on their own initiatives. This engagement in QA processes not only promotes a sense of belonging to the quality community of the institution, but also entails increased responsibility regarding the processes being implemented. The realisation that everyone can contribute to quality processes to enhance their own experience and that of others boosts the motivation to stay involved and ensures effective multidirectional communication among all stakeholder groups. The ultimate goal is to drive the improvement of institutional policies and procedures to ensure across-the-board practices, which, in relation to external criteria, may be rendered good/best practice for the sector. Thus, the overall educational experience is enhanced.

What students, teaching staff and quality managers want to invest in

In the current context, different groups of stakeholders frequently choose not even to voice their opinions/concerns regarding quality assurance, let alone get involved and contribute proactively to shaping the quality culture in their own institutional environment. This may be due to various reasons (SPEAQ reports, <http://speaqproject.wordpress.com/resources>, 21 January 2014): they hold the view that quality assurance is imposed externally and there is little they can contribute within their role; they identify their own concerns as being unique and not shared by or of interest to others; they view quality assurance as a burden which comes with additional effort and responsibilities for which there is no recognition; they lack confidence that the institution will/does listen or take action; or they have simply not been consulted. Such reasons indicate that institutions may need to change their approach in particular to collecting feedback, the very fuel of the quality cycle, but also in reacting to concerns, implementing effective (formal and informal) actions and adopting good practices identified both in the institution and in the wider EHEA.

Project data suggests that a top-down change of policy does not necessarily lead to a change of mindset or change of quality culture in an institution. More intense dialogue and interaction between policy and practice are needed to ensure that responsibility for quality assurance is more evenly shared by all parties concerned (i.e. academics, students, administrators, quality managers, agencies etc.).

Across the board, in all participating countries, students, academic staff and quality managers agree that quality in higher education regards primarily the teaching and learning experience and its key contributing factors, such as: a close relationship between student and teacher, where feedback is constantly exchanged and motivation is fuelled from both directions; sufficient variation and flexibility in teaching methodology to allow for frequent adaptation to changing needs; transfer of up-to-date knowledge and professional experience; skill and competence development; coherent programmes aligned with market trends to give a competitive edge; state-of-the-art resources, facilities and infrastructure; student support services; transparent and effective communication of information etc. All these aspects are also felt to contribute to the image of the institution/programme being portrayed to the world. The reputation it builds is thus in direct relation to the evaluation of its quality as perceived by stakeholders. Hence, any quality assurance policies and procedures should be directly subordinate to the overall academic experience and must be a direct result of needs identified by different actors. Inviting stakeholders' views, listening to their voice, encouraging debate among stakeholder groups, and reacting to and acting on their suggestions builds up confidence and motivation, and results in overall satisfaction.

However, as reported, stakeholders' willingness to contribute to QA processes is often overshadowed by the fact that results are not always made visible in spite of their investment of effort and time. Thus, unless prompted otherwise, stakeholders prefer to keep within their comfort zone and frequently limit debates to their immediate day-to-day experiences, reluctant to look beyond these towards the wider institutional picture or to reflect upon their actions and their own roles within existing structures. Specifically, students are preoccupied about the degree they will be awarded and employability, if the knowledge, skills, competences and values transferred to them provide them with a fair chance of accessing their chosen career path. Nevertheless, they are also perceptive of the realities around them and whether these are set in such a way to facilitate their experience and ensure that they concentrate on learning rather than other more mundane issues, such as if they can find the lecture hall, if there are eating facilities on campus, if the library has enough copies of the book they have to read for next week etc. Teachers are concerned about the student-teacher ratio in class, the facilities in the classroom, the way students evaluate them and whether students apply relevant criteria for quality judgements; they receive little or no recognition for outstanding performance in the classroom or any proper support for development, while feeling pressure to constantly respond to growing expectations from their specific fields of research. Quality managers tend to talk more about the procedures in place and the difficulties that arise in trying to engage students and staff. They also acknowledge that they play a support function and any recommended action they may table would ultimately have to be signed off by staff with an academic background. From the interviews, it was apparent that quality managers with academic (teaching and/or research) experience have a broader approach and relate more easily to other stakeholders as they can empathise with their immediate needs.

Regarding the need for intervention, some areas deemed as requiring action are common to all stakeholder groups and countries represented, as summarised below.

- Quality processes should be generated from within the system and must become second-nature rather than burdensome and bureaucratic. All stakeholders need to be motivated and participation facilitated;
- A feedback culture needs to be improved so as to impact increasingly. The developmental role of feedback needs to be emphasised and stakeholders need to be supported in providing/reacting to feedback. To this aim, student (course) evaluations must be revisited;
- Communication channels, amongst all participants, at various levels, need to be enhanced to ensure effective exchange of information and ideas;
- Curricula must be better streamlined, overall learning outcomes must be aligned with workplace requirements;
- Teaching methods should be student-centred and engaging, and good practices discussed and shared across courses, disciplines, programmes, departments, institutions etc. Student feedback, peer observation and discussion forums should better serve this aim;
- Assessment practices must be transparent to allow for comparability and fairness;
- Staff and student induction should be both more comprehensive and tailored, including elements of quality assurance. Refresher training in QA should be offered to more senior staff;
- Internationalisation must acknowledge that specific quality measures need to be in place. International staff and students have various and different needs for which support structures must be developed. All stakeholders should also be aware of the challenges of the multicultural classroom;
- Promotion and marketing strategies need to be better focused and resources targeted effectively;
- Appropriate infrastructure and services must support the academic experience.

Although all-encompassing, and seemingly necessitating the engagement of large implementation teams, all these areas, bar the last two, can be tackled by making use of existing resources, with no need for major financial investments. SPEAQ has proved that if institutional mechanisms of empowerment are in place allowing stakeholders to take on what they assess as doable, at least in initial piloting stages, projects can achieve sound results to be exploited and multiplied in other institutional units, and subsequently incorporated into policy, as will be illustrated below.

How students, teaching staff and quality managers can invest in quality

Having pinpointed the immediate areas of improvement and expressed their availability to collaborate, working groups of stakeholders in each partner institution were to translate one of the proposals into QA actions to be implemented in the academic year 2012-2013, Year 2 of the SPEAQ project. With no orchestration to avoid overlap or to address all major areas, partners selected a variety of sub-projects from those proposed in Year 1, all converging in the common themes identified in the data collection exercises and involving the three stakeholder categories whose voices were heard. Choices were based on priorities for the institution, potential level of involvement of stakeholder groups, and availability of resources. The initiatives were not provided with financial support from individual institutions; the main investment can be quantified in the time, work and effort of the stakeholders. Participants expressed great interest and were both motivated and gratified by the opportunity they were being provided with, the responsibility that was being placed on them, and the increasing sense of belonging to a greater community. Taking ownership of quality by putting their own views to the test, ensuring that those views have institutional resonance, contributing to the development of the professional environment alongside peers and other stakeholders, and getting recognition for these actions has proved to be a very strong incentive, and one that has driven forward the quality culture in all partner institutions.

Addressing all the areas listed above may seem, at first sight, a very ambitious undertaking. However, partners adopted what proved to be a sensible approach, breaking down the areas into more manageable actions which could be piloted before becoming institutionalised.

In Hungary at the University of Szeged, a module on quality assurance was designed and incorporated in a communications degree programme. The content input was the result of collaboration amongst staff, students and quality managers and its delivery was beneficial both to staff and students, enabling a better understanding of quality processes and the degree of involvement suitable for each stakeholder group. In the UK and Denmark special attention was given to the enhancement of feedback, with the LLAS Centre at the University of Southampton developing tools to encourage staff to deliver relevant, timely, meaningful and enhanced feedback to students, and to approach feedback as a dialogue, and the Copenhagen Business School analysing more precisely the relevance of student evaluation forms and designing strategies to engage students in a more meaningful evaluation exercise. At the University of Trento, Italy, the initial focus was to reflect on support offered to international students, however during implementation the project exceeded its aim and took on the broader theme of improving communication channels and promotion strategies for the whole institution. Spain and Austria inquired closely into curriculum coherence and, respectively, assessment standardisation, with Deusto University adjusting a degree curriculum in line with students' recommendations regarding relevance and employability and the University of Innsbruck developing assessment grids to support a more transparent assessment strategy to benefit all. Aveiro University in Portugal set up a monthly discussion forum to promote the involvement of teachers and students in quality processes, and to encourage them to come together to voice their opinions and reflect on their practices in positive and constructive ways and thus develop a feeling of

empowerment. In Romania, at the Babes-Bolyai University, it was felt that student induction could greatly benefit from student input alongside the more traditional teacher-tutor led induction. This resulted in the development of a student mentoring system managed for students and by students, under departmental supervision. The University of Jyväskylä in Finland further scrutinised internationalisation requirements and provided support to content teachers who use the medium of English to reflect and adapt their teaching approach and assessment methods.

The outcomes of all the projects are extremely positive and the potential for these initiatives to be acknowledged as good practice and be incorporated in institutional policies and procedures is very high. The sub-projects did, however, meet with various challenges, many of which to do with logistics and availability. Nonetheless, overcoming other challenges became the source of considerable satisfaction. Frequently noted was the difficulty stakeholders encountered when they were faced with the prospect of leaving their comfort zone and adjusting their mindset to accommodate a more open attitude, to think and act outside the box, or within other “boxes”. Negotiating solutions by consideration of all valid views, even when conflicting, has proved a very rewarding experience and one with a profound developmental character. Stakeholders found themselves more knowledgeable and better equipped to take on a broader, more comprehensive view of quality issues and this, in turn, has led to an increase in confidence about their ability to valuably contribute to quality processes. Participants report that they now view their role in a broader perspective and are keen to take on renewed responsibilities, which previously they would not have identified themselves with. They are also more willing to value the other stakeholders’ opinions. If before the projects, each stakeholder category believed “quality” or lack of quality to be the responsibility or the remit of another category, as projects developed there was an increased awareness that quality practices are a shared responsibility based on the combination of informal and formal quality processes, and an understanding that the quality cycle must include all stakeholders in open and constructive dialogue. Quality is no longer perceived as being done to stakeholders, but by stakeholders. With this change in perception, proactive participation is in the power of the individual but is channelled into the community that individual belongs to. To quote an Italian student: “In short, I think the project left this spirit of a community which brings different actors together to discuss the best prospects for the community itself.”

Conclusions

Frequently, quality assurance is interpreted as the body of policies and procedures institutions have to comply with, be they national, institutional or departmental. This conception that quality is imposed from above, rather than the result of the well-orchestrated engagement of all involved, leads to apprehension by various stakeholders and a reluctance to engage in/contribute to such processes, in particular at the ground level. We strongly believe that if quality assurance is to be of shared ownership amongst the various contributors to the educational experience, existing good practices on the ground, as well as the future developments indicated and desired by stakeholders, need to be consolidated into policies and procedures. Hence, bottom-up initiatives and top-down requirements need to converge for quality assurance and enhancement processes to be viewed as successful by all those concerned and to contribute to a quality culture valued within and beyond the institution.

The paradigm shift will occur under certain favourable conditions: where there is a better understanding of QA as an everyday reality for all stakeholders, rather than an external imposition; where there is increased awareness of the role of each of the three stakeholder categories and their potential to interact, react and act, together and individually, to make significant contributions to quality assurance and enhancement; where QA roles and responsibilities are better defined to enable stakeholders to feel

more confident about their individual role which has a definite place within the larger system; where institutions promote bottom-up influence on policy making through innovative and inclusive practices for quality assurance and enhancement; and where such QA tools are in use which all stakeholders can feel comfortable with.

As demonstrated by the SPEAQ outcomes, the more stakeholders are facilitated to buy into the ownership of quality, the higher the chances are that their motivation to get involved and contribute to quality assurance will increase and this involvement will then ensure enhancement resulting in a virtuous quality cycle.

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The potential impact of the internal service units on the quality culture in a higher education institution, and how to make optimal use of it

By Dries Froyen,²⁵ Luk Indesteege,²⁶ Stefan Oeyen²⁷ and Reinoud Vandervelden²⁸

1. Introduction

We want to explore the potential impact of the internal service units on the quality culture in a higher education institution. We will briefly introduce the primary mission of higher education in Flanders, the importance of the service units in an organisation according to the EFQM-model and the concept of quality culture. Next we will describe how the service units are involved in the external QA in Flanders and in the internal QA in our HEI, Limburg Catholic University College or LCUC. The latter is illustrated by a recent initiative taken at LCUC to make optimal use of the potential impact of the service units on the quality culture in our HEI. Next we will describe some challenges we encountered and how we tried to answer them. The whole process is based on Lewin's Change Management Model in three phases and the Engine of Innovation model by J. Staes. The paper closes with a status to date of how service units are involved in the QA in our HEI and some future perspectives.

In Flanders, the primary mission of higher education is:

1. Education
2. (Applied) research
3. Services to society
4. Development of arts (in case the HEI has study programmes in arts)

At LCUC, a number of **internal service units** such as ICT, logistics, finances and HR are centrally organised to support the faculties in achieving their primary mission. The subject of the present paper is the question of how the centrally-organised service units (can) influence the quality culture in the entire HEI.

According to the **EFQM model** (see Figure 1), the role of the service units in an organisation is described mainly as part of the enabler "Partnerships and Resources", which accounts for 10% of the total score in the EFQM evaluation framework. Although this may not seem that impressive, everybody will acknowledge the direct impact of e.g. a failing server, a non-paid conference invoice, an inadequate qualification or a cold classroom on the quality of teaching and learning, research, and services to society. These examples illustrate the direct impact of the service units on the enabler "processes".

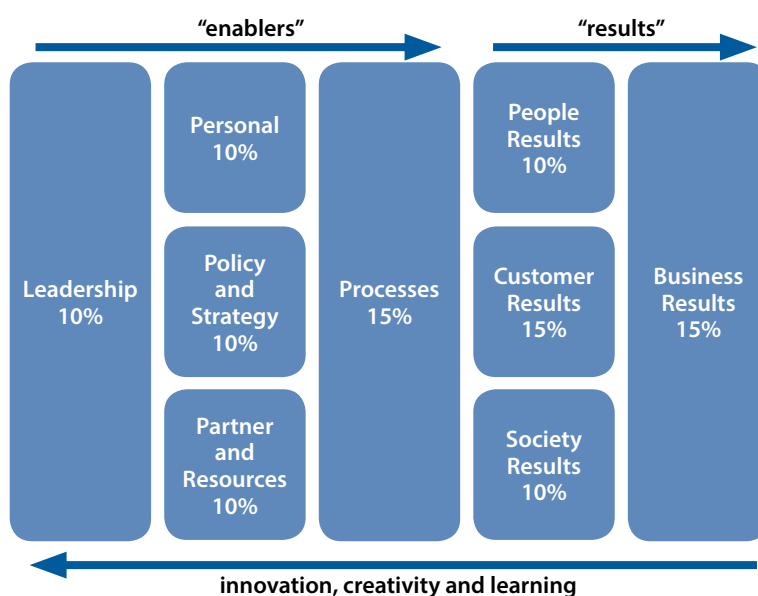
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Figure 1.



In the present paper, however, we want to go beyond the potential direct advantage of well functioning service units. The aim of the present paper is not merely to reflect on how we can create a quality culture in the entire HEI, including service units. The aim is to reflect on the potential impact of the service units on the quality culture in the entire HEI.

To avoid any misunderstanding regarding the concept of **"quality culture"**, we will briefly clarify how we consider quality culture in our QA unit at LCUC. There are multiple papers discussing quality culture.²⁹ Recurrent interpretations are "sharing the same values and attitudes", "working together on quality improvement" and "involving all levels of the organisation". To make it concrete, when we aim for a healthy quality culture in our HEI, we aim for a HEI in which, on all levels (from bottom to top) and in all aspects (faculties and service units), all staff are motivated to contribute to structural quality improvement of the processes and products they are directly and indirectly involved with.³⁰

We strongly believe that a lot of gain can be achieved when faculties and service units do not function as islands, but when they collaborate even on aspects they are not directly responsible for. We acknowledge that in times of budget cuts, this is not an easy message to convey. Employees are confronted with an increased workload, which logically leads to the reaction to fence off their responsibility and create demarcation lines. Nevertheless, we believe that in the long run, it will pay off to invest in a collaborative approach and a collaborative organisation.

To make our point early in the paper, we believe that:

- Faculties can learn from service units because the latter have a wider focus than strictly education, research, services to society and development of arts, and therefore use unknown approaches that might inspire the QA in the faculties. They also maintain a bird's-eye view on things. Some examples: the service units are used to work with indicators and they are more product-oriented than process-oriented. Service units can learn that QA is not limited to complying with legal regulations in e.g. finances, logistics or HR, and that it indirectly contributes to the primary mission of the HEI.
- Strategic goals should be actively supported by all sections of the HEI, also by the service units that have a role as enablers (see EFQM model): e.g. for internationalisation, ecological sustainability by reducing

²⁹ see for example Enemark (2000) and Woods (1998), or also www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/projects/eqc

³⁰ see for example Indestege (2012)

water and energy consumption through sensitising the staff and improving the infrastructure and student-centred learning.

There are multiple ways of achieving the objectives mentioned above. Good results can only be reached if and when the organisation's management supports the changes, according to Lewin's Change Management Model.³¹ One factor that helped in "unfreezing", which involves breaking down the existing status quo before you can build up a new way of operating, was a significant change in the system for external QA in Flanders.

2. External QA in Flanders and impact on internal QA at LCUC

In the former accreditation system in Flanders and the Netherlands (note: we have a bi-national accreditation system), the role of the service units in the external review of the study programmes was limited to classroom conditions, the domain-specific facilities like labs, training rooms, workspaces and the library.³²

The new accreditation system in Flanders and the Netherlands focuses not only on the quality of individual study programmes (accreditation of individual study programmes) but also on the HE institution as a whole (institutional review).

- The accreditation of study programmes will mainly focus on teaching and learning.
- The institutional review will focus on all the processes in the entire institution that guide and support teaching: Although the focus is still on the quality of education, external review commissions will make vertical and horizontal audit-trails in all aspects of the HEI in order to check for consistency in policy execution and the existence of a quality culture (the assessment framework for Flanders is not yet finalised, but for a similar approach check the Dutch assessment framework³³).

The way service units will be the object of the institutional review is in part up to the institution itself (for an insight see public reports of institutional reviews in the Netherlands³⁴). The starting point for the review will be the structure of the HEI as explained by the HEI itself in a self-evaluation report. Since no HEI will deny the importance of the service units, it will most likely be part of each description of the HEI and will consequently be part of the review.

The new external review system, including the institutional review, triggered us to rethink the QA approach at LCUC. In anticipation of the institutional review, it was decided a few years ago at LCUC that the QA unit functions for both the faculties and the service units.

The faculties at LCUC are rather small (maximum 1 000 students) and the service units are traditionally strongly centralised. By sharing resources, we install strong service units with a lot of expertise. Our service units know what is going on in the HEI and have the autonomy to proactively act for LCUC's benefit. The following examples show how cooperation might originally come at a cost, but eventually gains efficiency:

³¹ see for example Burnes (2004) and Lewin (1947)

³² www.nvao.net/page/downloads/Accreditatiekader_VL_1_sept_2009.pdf

³³ www.nvao.net/page/downloads/DEFINITIEVE_KADERS_INSTELLINGSTOETS_22_november_2011_English.pdf

³⁴ www.nvao.net/overzicht_instellingstoets_kwaliteitszorg_nederland

- “Logistics” is a rather large service unit at LCUC, employing about 50 people. In order to keep an overview of the questions and tasks from the faculties and the other service units, they have developed an electronic ticket system. The success of this system is illustrated by the fact that other service units, such as ICT, also have adopted the electronic ticket system. ICT and Logistics are now considering how to link up and cooperate in order to fine-tune the system in a way that it can automatically register interesting data such as: type of questions/tasks; average duration before first answer; average duration before resolving the issue. This collaboration leads to the improvement of both units.
- An example of cooperation between ICT and the QA unit, with the involvement of teaching staff, is the development of an intranet system. Besides the aim to create a platform to share documents, we aimed to create an intranet system in such a way that the documentation required for internal as well as external QA is systematically documented and easily accessible.

These examples of cooperation between different service units and faculties are not unique. However promising they may sound, it is equally clear that they still can be improved. Additional spontaneous cooperation and innovation are, however, usually considered less important than formal regulations and primary responsibilities. Moreover, a potential risk in a system of centralised service units is that they may become less client-oriented, because they do not have to compete for clients. In times of budget cuts and ever increasing demands and administration, employees might feel the need to protect themselves, create demarcation lines and minimise spontaneous cooperation and out-of-the-box thinking.

3. How to make optimal use of the potential impact of service units on quality culture?

We agree that if common strategic goals are defined (and interpreted the same by everyone), and each unit has been allocated sufficient resources, the HEI will be able to function and realise the common strategic goals: the heads of faculty and the managers of service units are responsible for the execution of the strategic goals by adjusting the mission of their faculty or service unit in line with the strategic goals. However, reality teaches us that different interpretations of the same strategic goals can easily occur, and that unrealistic expectations or limited resources might hinder the realisation of high quality processes and products in line with the strategic goals.

As mentioned in the introduction, a quality culture requires the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, a culture of open communication and access to information. A common approach to also involve the service units in the development and execution of strategic goals is to organise meetings with the heads of faculty and managers of service units. In the initiative described below we aimed, however, to go further and involve not only the managers of service units but also the (staff) members of the service units. This project was set up because we expected that the input of staff members would have a different perspective (bottom-up). Therefore this input is valuable in creating a good environment for innovative approaches.

Thus, as with the faculties, which are all represented by a QA coach, we asked the service units to similarly appoint a representative among their staff members, also to function as a QA coach. Criteria for selection are not being the head of the unit and mandatory interest in quality assurance.

Our ambition is to meet up with each service unit (staff director and QA coach) three times a year, to discuss their quality action plan at the start of the year, to evaluate improvement processes in the middle of the year and to evaluate improvement results at the end of the year. The entire group of QA coaches (faculties and service units) meets a few times a year to provide insights in QA and learn from each other.

The goal is to create a platform for discussing quality assurance on all the different levels (top and bottom) and address all the different aspects (primary and supportive) of the HEI.

As described before, the change in the system for external QA in Flanders was a factor in acknowledging the need for a change, and helped accepting our suggestions in the previous paragraphs. We presented our suggestions in individual meetings with managers of service units. In these meetings we asked first about how their service units are organised and how we could be of any service to them. Next we presented our suggestions, and explained how they could meet their needs. Although it required a clear investment and commitment, at this stage all managers of service units were easily convinced to give our suggestions a try.

4. Challenges encountered with implementing the QA coaches for service units

During the academic year 2012-2013, we organised three meetings with all the QA coaches of faculties and service units. After each meeting we consulted informally with QA coaches, heads of faculty and managers of service units and looked into their experiences, in order to evaluate “the transition”.³⁵ Between the second and the third meeting we visited each of the service units and faculties to explain our vision and check the ambitions of QA coaches and their managers. After the third meeting, the QA unit was invited to a directors’ meeting where heads of faculty and managers of service units assemble, to explain the approach and accomplishments:

- An introduction to basic QA terminology for QA coaches of the service units.
- A growing sense of the importance of QA in service units at the level of employees and motivation to plan actions on QA, like a satisfaction survey.
- Some exercises to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking and cooperation with other service units and faculties.

Although we were pleased to experience great cooperation with both the managers of service units and most of the new QA coaches, we are aware of the challenges:

1. An important aspect of the creation of a quality culture is the use of a shared language. Therefore we initially organised the entire meeting with the QA coaches together (faculties and service units). This proved to be too ambitious an approach. The coaches from the faculties are more experienced in QA and have a different focus. A considerable part of the meeting was either not relevant or understandable for the QA coaches of the service units.

We therefore organised the group meetings as follows: the first hour we meet with the QA coaches for teaching and discuss matters that are relevant for them only. In the second hour, the QA coaches of the service units join the meeting. We then discuss issues that are relevant for both groups. And in the third hour, the QA coaches of the faculties leave and we provide a training on QA for the QA coaches of the service units.

2. The culture of making all staff partners in QA is not present in each unit – in some units staff members have merely executive functions and they are not familiar with participating in the quality improvement of work processes and services. We are convinced that most employees are trying to do the best job possible. However, it takes time to develop a culture in which critical, constructive thinking about oneself and others is present.

We do not want anyone to feel forced to be a QA coach. We have to admit that it was difficult to find volunteers in some service units (see also challenge 4). We are careful to discuss the right topic at the right level. Although we want to involve the QA coach in improving the HEI, we should not try to solve problems that can only be solved at the management level of the heads of faculty and the managers of service units.

3. Risk of creating a forum to ventilate frustrations.

It should be kept in mind that the meeting should focus on securing quality and quality improvement as a job in which we work together and not blame each other. Inspired by the “appreciative inquiry” method (see Indesteege, 2012) we try to create a positive vibe.

4. Some QA coaches have a misconception of the task at hand: they have the idea that they are the ones that need to tell colleagues how to improve their work, and feel uncomfortable with it.

We explain that the coach is not the one pointing out what is wrong and telling everybody how to do it better. The QA coach is the one that puts QA on the agenda during meetings and informs colleagues on how to systematically work on QA. On the other hand, some people felt uncomfortable in the position of QA coach. The QA coach needs to be a person engaging the role of the experienced and trusted colleague.

5. Service units do not have a budget to invest in a QA coach

It is hard for a small service unit with a heavy task load to invest time in a QA coach. We explained that our expectations about the QA coach are adapted to the possibilities and budget within each service unit. We also explained that a good QA system can significantly save time, e.g. by systematically evaluating what is efficient and what is not, and by adjusting accordingly.

5. Status to date and future perspectives

The first (informal) evaluation results are positive:

- Most QA coaches are motivated to participate in the development of a HEI quality culture.
- In general the service directors explicitly asked for more attention and support from the QA unit in organising systematic QA within their unit.

On the other hand, it was proposed that the joint meeting of QA faculty coaches with those of the service units should be put on hold. A second big “transition” crossed the first ongoing transition before this one had the chance to “freeze”:³⁶ the merger operation of LCUC with two other HEIs. It was unexpectedly decided to speed up the start of the merger, with its first concrete implications in the academic year 2013-2014: the formation of a united service unit for QA.

We are pleased to note that our partner HEIs in the merger are also looking forward to being involved in the new, shared, service units in the QA system of the new HEI. The ambition over the next few years is to stimulate each faculty and service unit to put QA explicitly on the agenda in their internal meetings, but also in their meetings with other faculties and service units. In the faculties this task is the shared responsibility of the head of faculty and the QA coach. In the service units, this will mostly fall to the responsibility of the managers of service units (mainly because of challenge 4 and 5), whereas some service units will continue with a QA coach. The new QA unit will continue to stimulate the awareness of collaborative QA on all levels and within all aspects of the HEI. This can be done during the training and hands-on support within the

³⁶ see for example Burnes (2004) and Lewin (1947)

faculties and service units, during the meeting with the QA coaches of the faculties, during meetings with heads of faculty and managers of service units. Beside all this, it is still the ambition of the new QA unit to meet with representatives of the service units to exchange good practices and learn from each other. At the time of finalising the present paper, the first meetings with representatives of the service units have already been planned.

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Conceptualising student engagement: A co-creation perspective

By Tina Harrison³⁷

Introduction

Student engagement is the current “buzzword” in the quality agenda in higher education (Kahu, 2013). Whilst the term is relatively new, the notion of student engagement has developed out of earlier work concerned with student involvement and student participation (Kuh *et al.*, 2007). More recent, though, is the way in which student engagement is perceived in relation to the quality of higher education. The interest in student engagement has evolved from a student-centred focus on enhancing student learning to a proxy for higher education quality and a performance indicator for higher education providers. Governments are increasingly interested in measuring student engagement, and instruments exist in the US (National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE) and in Australia (Australian Survey of Student Engagement, AUSSE) for its measurement and national benchmarking. The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) recently set out expectations and indicators of good practice in relation to student engagement in its UK Quality Code (QAA, 2012).

Whilst there is general agreement on the importance of student engagement, considerable debate exists in the literature over the exact construct of engagement. Some authors suggest that existing instruments used to measure student engagement (such as NSSE and AUSSE) are based on flawed conceptualisations of student engagement and provide only a partial view (Hagel *et al.*, 2010).

In order to harness the benefits from student engagement – for both students and universities – it is essential that we have a common understanding of its construct. Based on a literature review, and guided by the approach to student engagement adopted at the University of Edinburgh (see Figure 1), this paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding the construct of student engagement that sets out both what it is and how it potentially can be influenced. Consistent with the theme of the conference – working together to take quality forward – the paper proposes a conceptualisation of student engagement from a co-creation perspective.

Figure 1.

Student Engagement Statement

At the University of Edinburgh we are committed to providing an outstanding student experience and we recognise the important role of our students as cocreators of their own academic experience. Our students are encouraged to play an active role in ensuring their University experience is an excellent one. Our students are critical members of a thriving and vibrant academic community which is constantly evolving and developing.

Staff at the University work in partnership with Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) to ensure that our students are central to governance, decision making, quality assurance and enhancement, providing opportunities for our students to become active participants and giving our students a voice. Crucial to this is the engagement of our students at every point in the student journey, at every level of the University, and in both the formal curriculum as well as in cocurricular activities.

[www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Quality/studentengagement/StudentEngagementStatement\(v030ct2013\).pdf](http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Quality/studentengagement/StudentEngagementStatement(v030ct2013).pdf)

www.ed.ac.uk/news/2013/statement-140313

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Students are not singularly and independently engaged. The ways students engage are influenced not only by individual factors (such as interest or motivation) but also by contextual factors (such as the learning environment) and interactive factors (such as the relationships with teaching staff and other students). Hence, student engagement should not be viewed only from the perspective of the student as an isolated individual but in relation to the activities/objects/people that students are engaging with and the context in which this occurs. Hence, we argue in this paper that student engagement must be viewed from the perspective of co-creation.

Conceptualisations of student engagement

Trowler (2010) argues that the literature on student engagement is a “mixed bag” offering up wide-ranging understandings of the term. Prominent research defines student engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Kuh *et al.*, 2007) and describes student engagement as encompassing: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities (Coates, 2007, p. 122).

The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2012, p. 2) notes that the meaning of student engagement “has evolved over time and has been applied to any of the following: time spent on task; quality of effort; student involvement; social and academic integration; good practices in education; and learning outcomes” and goes on to define student engagement as covering two domains: engagement in learning, and participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes.

Hagel *et al.* (2011), citing Vibert and Shields (2003), identify three ideological perspectives in relation to student engagement: the rational/technical perspective; the interpretive/student-centred perspective; and the critical/transformational perspective. The rational/technical perspective focuses on preparing students for life after formal education. It is a functional perspective that prioritises involving and engaging students in activities that are deemed by educators, government and societal expectations to be useful and productive. The interpretive/student-centred perspective argues that engagement is more than simply being involved in activity (particularly activity deemed to be relevant by educators), and that students need to have autonomy, choice and control to be genuinely engaged. The critical/transformational perspective focuses not on the activity of engagement per se but on the goal of engagement. It questions not what students should be engaged in but how and for what purpose students engage. The key emphasis is on engagement as a means of transformation.

The authors argue that a failure to consider the ideological basis of approaches to engagement may lead to misperceptions in both the conception of engagement and its measurement. Indeed, a focus on a purely technical perspective may even conflict with our notion of engagement, leading to students demonstrating purely functional behaviour and “playing the game”. If employers and educators do not have a sound idea of the activities that are essential for students to engage in, it will not produce the desired outcome, even by the rational/technical perspective.

In addition to the ideological perspectives, Kahu (2013) outlines four distinct research perspectives or lenses through which to understand engagement: the behavioural perspective, the psychological perspective, the socio-cultural perspective, and the holistic perspective.

The behavioural perspective is argued to be the most widely accepted view of engagement capturing a range of institutional practices and student behaviours. Student engagement according to the behavioural

perspective is defined as the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities. The NSSE and AUSSE are tools that are used to measure engagement according to the behavioural approach. A purely behavioural approach, though, fails to account for how students are feeling. Learning is not simply about participating in activity, but also about emotional involvement. Consequently, the behavioural approach has been criticised; and the NSSE and AUSSE instruments as tools to measure behavioural engagement have in particular been criticised for their theoretical justification, validity and predictive ability (Kahu, 2013; Hagel *et al.*, 2011).

The psychological perspective views engagement as a psychological process. It seeks to understand what motivates students to be engaged according to various overlapping dimensions of engagement: behavioural, affective and cognitive (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Students who are behaviourally engaged typically comply with behavioural norms of conduct and rule following, including attendance. Students who are affectively engaged experience such emotions as interest, enjoyment or a sense of belonging. Students who are cognitively engaged invest effort in their learning and seek to go beyond the requirements. The psychological approach has much to offer in that it moves beyond mere behavioural participation to take account of the feelings and motivations of students. However, it views engagement largely from an individual viewpoint and places less emphasis on the situation or context in which engagement occurs. Engagement is situational and arises from the interplay between the engagement context and the individual.

The socio-cultural perspective by contrast focuses on the impact of the broader social context on student engagement. The socio-cultural environment foregrounds the context in which student engagement takes place – this can be broad at sector level (such as the introduction of fees) and also at institutional level (according to institutional norms, traditions and practices). Differences in cultural context are a key argument against using standardised engagement instruments across cultural boundaries (including international boundaries as well as disciplinary boundaries) (Hagel *et al.* 2012).

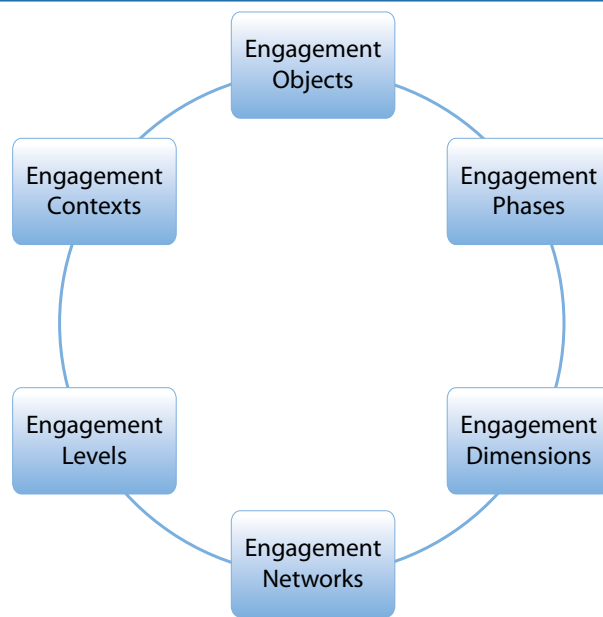
The final perspective is the holistic perspective which attempts to integrate all of the above perspectives and take a whole-of-student perspective.

Proposed framework for understanding student engagement as a process of co-creation

The proposed framework builds on and extends the holistic view and considers engagement as a process of co-creation. Whilst the holistic view has many advantages, it does not emphasise the interaction inherent in the experiential nature of student engagement. Our extended view acknowledges the student as co-creator of their educational experience. Students are thus not viewed as separate from the educational process but an inherent part of it. Hence, engagement must be viewed within this context. This view recognises that student engagement sits within a broader socio-cultural context and network of interactions that influence and are influenced by student engagement.

Figure 2 illustrates the sphere of student engagement, highlighting that student engagement encompasses a number of aspects. In all cases there is an active interaction between the student and the aspect of student engagement in a process of co-creation, as will be discussed below in a series of framework propositions.

Figure 2.



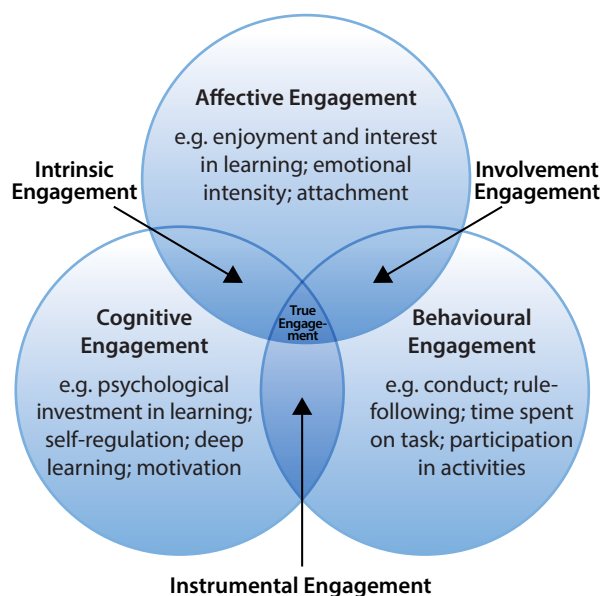
Student engagement reflects a psychological state in response to an interactive experience with an engagement object

Student engagement can exist as a state; it is a reflection of being or feeling. It can exist as either a persistent and general condition that characterises how students relate to their university experience in general, or it can exist as a temporal or short-term absorption in a specific activity, referred to as “flow” (Steele and Fullagar, 2009). Regardless of the long- or short-term nature of the state or its intensity, engagement occurs in response to an engagement object: it is an interactive experience. Engagement is thus experiential in nature. Trowler and Trowler (2010) identify three foci or objects of engagement: engagement in individual student learning; engagement with structure and process; engagement with identity. Within these there will be further sub-divisions. In terms of student learning, students engage with classes or with assignments, the nature of which very much affects the engagement response.

Student engagement is a multidimensional construct

Within literature, engagement is broadly defined as consisting of three key dimensions: behavioural; cognitive; and affective dimensions. True engagement occurs when all three dimensions are represented. The presence of just one or two dimensions results in only partial engagement and, depending on the nature of engagement, can lead to very different outcomes both in terms of student experience and student performance. Figure 3 illustrates a typology of engagement behaviours resulting from the combination of partial dimensions. At the level of the single dimension, acting engaged (behavioural engagement) without feeling engaged amounts to compliance. Feeling engaged (affective engagement) without acting engaged results in disassociation. Engaging only cognitively may result in isolation or a lack of sense of community. The combination of two dimensions results in other manifestations of engagement. Being both affectively and behaviourally engaged produces involvement or participation in what may be a short-term activity. A combination of cognitive and affective engagement is more likely to signal intrinsic and longer-lasting engagement. A combination of cognitive and behavioural engagement may result in instrumental engagement in which students exhibit goal-directed behaviours as a means-end relationship. Attempting to foster or measure only one or two dimensions at the expense of the other(s) may lead to an impoverished view of engagement.

Figure 3.



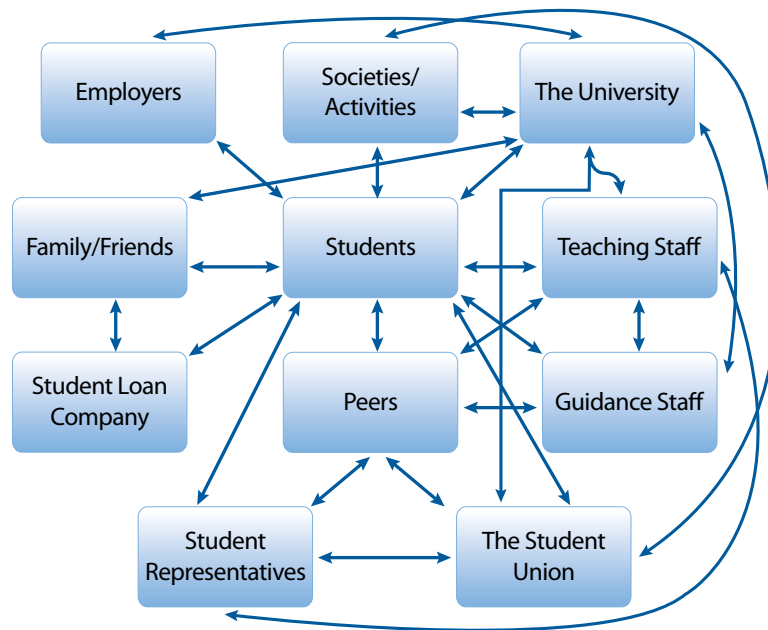
Student engagement is a dynamic, interactive and iterative process

The student engagement process can be viewed as a series of engagement states. Viewing engagement as a process recognises that it is malleable, varying in intensity and responsive to the engagement environment. The process of engagement may also comprise engagement phases, each one with the potential to build in intensity in an iterative process. For example, engagement with the first year experience will have a subsequent impact on the next stage of the student journey leading to the next phase of student engagement. Hence, based on prior experiences students may learn to engage differently. Student engagement will develop and change according to the interactive context. This is summed up by Coates (2005, p. 26) who argues that the concept of student engagement “is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Learning is seen as a “joint proposition”, which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved”. Hence, individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement.

Student engagement takes place within a network of relationships

Student engagement does not operate in isolation; it is embedded within a broader network of relationships and interactions. It is a social process that involves interactions with and among students, teachers and others. Figure 4 illustrates the network of student engagement and the main interactions. This extends beyond dyadic interactions. Interactive experiences are an indispensable component of a student’s engaged state.

Figure 4.



Student engagement is influenced by the broader situational conditions and context

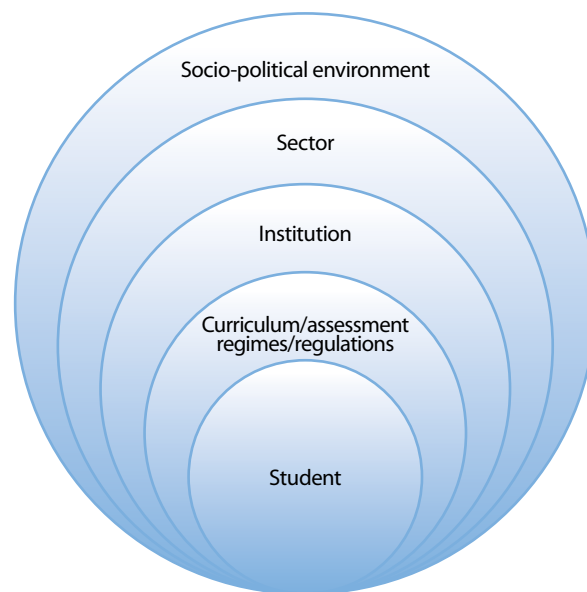
Student engagement is fundamentally situational, arising from the interplay between context and individual. Yet, the context of engagement is often overlooked in studies of engagement (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). Understanding the context in which engagement occurs is important to understanding engagement itself. Kuh (2009, p. 314) argues that "... it is wrong to presume that what works in one setting for certain students will have the same effects in other settings for different types of students. Because institutional contexts differ, students' experiences will differ, as will what they get out of college".

It is possible to conceive of the engagement context as multi-layered (see Figure 5). The immediate context experienced by students is the curriculum context. The assessment regimes, regulations and disciplinary expectations define the curriculum context that exerts a proximal influence on student engagement. Beyond this, institutional norms, traditions and practices define institutional expectations that influence student engagement both directly and indirectly via teaching staff.

The institution itself is also influenced by sector norms, expectations and practices. Institutions belong to and benchmark themselves against reference groups. Russell Group or LERU institutions emphasise research over teaching which influences and defines student engagement in this context compared to more teaching-led universities.

At the broadest level, the socio-political context has an impact on engagement. Market-driven changes, changes in societal values, the commodification of education all potentially interact with and influence student engagement.

Figure 5.



Conclusion

This paper has sought to conceptualise the construct of student engagement and define it according to a framework. Building on the holistic perspective, the proposed framework conceptualises student engagement as a process of co-creation that involves a number of key aspects that make up the sphere of student engagement. The framework proposes that student engagement: reflects a psychological state in response to an interactive experience with an engagement object; is a multidimensional concept; is a dynamic, interactive and iterative process; takes place within a network of relationships; and, operates within broader situational conditions and contexts. The framework highlights the key drivers of student engagement, offering insight for universities in terms of understanding how to influence and foster student engagement. It also raises implications for the measurement of student engagement, highlighting gaps in current approaches to student engagement measurement. Further work is needed to empirically examine this framework and explore the key influencing factors and determinants of student engagement.

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