

## 2022 European Quality Assurance Forum

### Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

Hosted by West University of Timisoara, Romania  
17-19 November 2022

#### Call for contributions: Paper submission form

**Deadline 22 July 2022**

*Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.*

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Eltjo Bazen

**Position:** Senior Quality Assurance Advisor

**Organisation:** HU UAS Utrecht

**Country:** the Netherlands

**E-mail address:** [eltjo.bazen@hu.nl](mailto:eltjo.bazen@hu.nl)

**Short bio (150 words max):** Eltjo is active in QA of HE for more than 10 years, currently working as Senior Quality Advisor and Chief Product Owner QA at HU UAS Utrecht in the Netherlands. As such he is advising programmes in their internal quality enhancement and external accreditation processes, and he is leading an institutional change programme to integralize QA and have it more culture-driven. In his profession his background in the studies of philosophy, business management and quality management are perfectly merged. On a national level he is part of several networks and working groups around QA of HE, both on system level and more executional. In Europe he is part of EURASHE's Community of Practice on QA and member of the EQAR Register Committee.

***If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who is the corresponding author and who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.***

*IMPORTANT: If you are submitting a proposal, please do not register for the event until the results of the selection process have been announced. Papers selected for EQAF 2022 will benefit from one reduced fee per contribution, which will be applied through a special registration process.*

*During the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum as well as the associated Powerpoint presentations will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers. Please however note that all Powerpoint presentations will be published, regardless of whether the full paper is published.*

#### Proposal

**Title: For whom is it valuable? Or: What is the value of satisfaction of the semi-finished product? Philosophical questions in higher education and the implications for quality.**

**Abstract (150 words max):**

Not many people ask the question of what exactly in higher education is valuable, and for whom. In this article the author uses a sharp question to research what higher education brings, and to whom. Three approaches are identified.

In the Student-centered approach, the gained knowledge, skills and attitude are the valuables that are transferred to the students. Student satisfaction is the main quality indicator. The Society-centered approach looks at society as the place where the value lands. The developed student is the vehicle, a main quality indicator for society is the judgement of experts: is the student worth the diploma? In the Employer-centered approach the working environment of the graduate is where value is added. Employer satisfaction on how well the graduate is performing professionally is the main quality indicator.

Interestingly enough, the student moves from being receiver of the process of higher education, to being a 'semi-finished product'.

**The corresponding sub-topic of the proposal:** Student participation in governance and quality assurance of higher education

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No**

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

**For whom is it valuable?**

*Or: What is the value of satisfaction of the semi-finished product? Philosophical questions in higher education and the implications for quality.*

Introduction

That education is valuable does not need to be explained to anyone on the planet. People in and around higher education sometimes wonder about how we can better sell its value, not whether it is of great value. Not many people however ask the question of what exactly is valuable, and for whom.

In this article, I want to bring together my various educational backgrounds to address a question I have been asking for years in my immediate environment. My background in philosophy is recognizable in asking a vexing question that seems odd but turns out to be essential. From a business perspective, the question is relevant because in an organization we need to know what we are actually doing in order to determine what to do and how. And from a quality management perspective, measuring and improving is nice, but only meaningful if we apply it to the right object. Because I keep noticing that asking the question is easier than answering it, and because I think it is fundamental to understand what we are actually doing in higher education, I like to pose this question to a wider audience. The question is about what is of value in higher education and for whom. Because I often feel that a little provocation helps for starting a good conversation, I usually phrase the question like this:

*Who is actually our customer in higher education?*

The first reaction of almost everyone in higher education is that we don't have customers, because we're not in a commercial enterprise and we're not selling stuff. And that the term "customer" therefore does not apply to our industry.

Now this reaction is emotionally understandable, but not that relevant. It is fine with me to rephrase the question as "Who is the main beneficiary of what we do?" The background to the question is that I want to understand what we actually do, what it means what we are doing. The terminology of "customer" and "product" may feel somewhat corporate, but it is still important to understand what we do. What do we actually do, for whom, and with what result? What exactly is the service

we provide? Only when we have a good understanding of the answers to these questions can we determine what quality is. And we can only work on quality properly if our goal is in line with our activities, and if we measure the right things to determine and improve the quality delivered.

The initial questions I asked each time were "who is the customer?" and "what is our product? The answers that come back have implications for what we call quality, and what the roles of different stakeholders are, such as the student.

### Main approaches

In the conversations I've had over the years, it appears time and again that there are three schools of thought, each with a radically different view of what higher education is, and who it is for. In the absence of generally accepted existing names, I decided to call the conceptual systems Student-centered, Society-centered, and Employer-centered. Below I show a brief overview, after which I will address the implications for the concept of quality of each way of thinking.

	<b>Student-centered</b>	<b>Society-centered</b>	<b>Employer-centered</b>
<b>Who is the customer?</b>	The student	The (regional) society, with the government as representative	(regional) employers / clients
<b>What is our product?</b>	The knowledge / competencies that we teach the student	Citizens who behave in an economically, socially and democratically decent way and thus add value to the (regional) society	Graduates with the right knowledge, skills and attitude

### Student-centered approach

The Student-centered approach is the most common one. Particularly among teachers and students, but also among others in and around education. The idea is that the core activity is teaching, because that's what we spend most of our time doing. And in those classes, students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes offered by the teaching staff. In addition, the student pays tuition. In itself a clear narrative.

This line of thinking makes student satisfaction the most important measure of quality. A view that is recognizable in the value assigned to (national) student surveys, which often function as the main input PR materials and university rankings.

### Society-centered approach

However, it is the case that the government bears the bulk of the costs of higher education. At least in the case of publicly funded education; for private educational institutions it is a bit of a different story since these are for-profit organizations. In other words, companies that need to make a profit in order to survive. I am not including this type of education in this consideration because other dynamics come into play here.

Based on the idea that the one who pays is the real customer, the Society centered approach points at the government as the customer. The government-and ultimately the taxpayer-finds it valuable to fund higher education because it helps society: economic activity generally becomes more valuable when the level of education is higher. Moreover, there is more things happening in education; the belief is that students are becoming better citizens because work is being done on socialization and

personalization, see the functions of education according to the work of educational pedagogue Gert Biesta.

The student is suddenly no longer the main consumer, but has become a kind of vehicle for social development. Student satisfaction should play a much less prominent role as a quality indicator; the opinion of external panels of experts who evaluate education on behalf of the government becomes an essential instrument in quality assurance, in addition to monitoring the effectiveness of taxpayers' money.

#### Employer-centered approach

Thinking a little further outside the educational institution is the Employer-centered approach. From this system of thought, learning and development by students is indeed a good activity, but the real addition of value only takes place when the graduates start working on the labor market. With employers or as self-employed individuals with customers and clients. This approach is central to, for example, the OECD, which does a lot of research into the effects of education. The OECD is also of the opinion that all higher education prepares people to function on the labor market, not only professional higher education (UAS's) but also the traditional universities that -at least on paper- train scientific researchers.

In this framework, the role of the student changes even more radically. The student is no longer a customer, or even a product, but the graduate is the product of higher education and the student, which makes the student a semi-finished product. I am aware that this might sound harsh and radical, but there is a lot to say for this line of thinking. For instance, by definition the student cannot know what is expected in terms of attitude, skills and knowledge for a starting professional in the chosen domain. The student might have an idea, but only the employed graduate and the employer really know.

Student satisfaction can hardly be found interesting as an indicator of quality anymore. A more appropriate quality indicator here would be what the added value of a graduate is in an organization. In practice, it is probably more feasible -and still a good substitute- to look at satisfaction of both employers (or customers or clients) of the graduate and satisfaction of the graduate himself around one or two years after graduation. This type of research takes place only sporadically, especially when it comes to employers of graduates.

#### Alternative approaches

Incidentally, other schools of thought are possible. For example, I once heard someone claim that the real customer of higher education is the parent of the prospective student. Because that is the party who has the most influence on the choice of what and where to study. But in general, such alternatives are more fun as thought exercises than they are actually relevant.

#### Consequences and conclusion

Although I hope that from a quality perspective it is clear what the consequences are of the approach adopted, I cannot resist making some things more explicit. Constructive alignment is well known in most educational circles. In this approach, educational objectives, teaching methods and activities and methods of testing are attuned to one another. This is a good example of thinking from a quality perspective, but here I would argue that we should take this a step further and start with the purpose of higher education as such. I have described above the questions that are very suitable for finding out what this goal is: "Who is the customer?" and "What is the product?". The biggest

change is then in accepting the answer, and aligning the quality frameworks and instruments with the answer.

I myself tend to follow the OECD, and take success in working life as the central quality indicator. Not just for professional higher education, but for all higher education. Consequences include conducting serious research into the performance of graduates, but also giving much less weight to student satisfaction. Now, by the way, don't think that I would not want to look at student satisfaction anymore. That is not the case; the point is that it completely changes character. To "produce" a good graduate, the student still needs to be well facilitated and duly motivated, and for that student satisfaction research is a great tool. But a semi-finished product simply does not have a good idea of what it means to be a good graduate young professional, and semi-finished satisfaction cannot be an indicator of quality of the final product.

#### **Discussion questions for the session:**

- What would we lose if we would follow this strict kind of thinking and choose one approach? How essential is it what we would lose?
- How many students really have a good insight in what it means to be a successful starting professional?
- If not one approach would be adopted, but all three approaches would be considered relevant, what would a clear quality concept look like?

#### **References:**

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 22 July 2022 to [egaf@eua.eu](mailto:egaf@eua.eu). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*