

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

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Abstract:

Student participation in quality assurance (QA) processes, and more particularly as evaluators in external QA, has been acknowledged in the European Standards and Guidelines since 2005. This paper examines the practice of involving students as part of the evaluators' pool in the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP). Following a pilot phase, IEP has been including students as peer team members in each evaluation since 2009. In addition, students are also present in the IEP Steering Committee. After five years of collaboration between IEP and the European Students' Union (ESU), student participation was assessed through surveys conducted among past and current student pool members as well as non-student pool members, complemented by interviews, including with institutions evaluated by IEP. Lines for reflection could include the further development of both the student experience within IEP and the Programme itself, but also, more generally, improving student involvement in QA.

Introduction

Student participation in quality assurance (QA) processes has been acknowledged in the European Standards and Guidelines (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 the results of 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 (out of 71 invited to respond), and the survey for pool members collected 36 answers (out of 55 invited to respond¹). In order to complement data obtained through these surveys, 12 phone interviews were conducted in July 2013: three with students, four with pool members (two with team chairs and two with coordinators), and five² with institutions that had their last IEP evaluation between 2009 and 2012. All

¹ All were team chairs or coordinators. Two-thirds of all respondents participated in evaluations where no student was involved.

² Interviews were conducted with the person who was acting as the liaison person with IEP at the time of the last IEP evaluation. These liaison persons were (current or former) vice-rectors or staff members of a university office (quality management, international relations ...). During the interviews, they sometimes expressed their institution's views, but most of time provided their input as individuals having undergone the evaluation process, and sharing their impressions in this regard. 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.

these institutions were evaluated by IEP at least twice; four of them had at least one evaluation without any student on the team.

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 institutions evaluated; and finally reflect on lessons learnt so far.

The IEP and the introduction of student participation

IEP is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA). It has provided external evaluation services to HEIs since 1994: to date, around 300 evaluations have been carried out in 45 countries worldwide. IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

IEP evaluates HEIs in the context of their specific goals and objectives with the aim of quality improvement. It emphasises an inclusive self-evaluation process and institutional self-knowledge for improving internal governance and management as well as for external accountability purposes. 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.

The evaluation methodology is based on a peer-review approach. In addition, all teams are truly European: they are typically composed of five members,³ with none of them coming from the country where the evaluated HEI is located, and none of them coming from the same country as another team member. The stability and diversity of the IEP pool, a group of about 90 European experts, is usually considered as one of IEP's biggest strengths. An IEP team nowadays includes a chair (former or current rector), team members (former or current rectors or vice-rector, and one student in each team), and a team coordinator (HE professional). IEP organises to the pool members an annual training seminar that aims to provide the latest developments in European HE trends as well as stimulate team dynamics.

The Programme is overseen by an independent Steering Committee, which has responsibility for the development, operation and monitoring of IEP. It is currently composed of eight members, including a student, and they are all members of the IEP pool. In addition, an ex-officio member is appointed by the EUA Board. The daily running of activities is carried out by the IEP secretariat.

As student participation in QA was increasingly discussed at European level, notably in the framework of the E4 group,⁴ the IEP Steering Committee (SC) started considering including students in the IEP evaluation teams in 2005/2006. Discussions in the SC and within the IEP pool revealed a mixed picture at that time: while some pool members were convinced of the benefit of student participation, others expressed doubts and were less acquainted with the idea of student involvement at large. On the one hand, concerns

³ In the case of follow-up evaluations or evaluations in an institution with less than 3 500 students, the team is composed of four members.

⁴ Since 2001, ENQA, the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Associations of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and EUA have been meeting regularly as the E4 group to discuss how to develop a European dimension for QA further. This partnership resulted in the ESG, and the co-organisation of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF).

mostly related to students' lack of experience in managing a university as a whole, possibly hindering the peer-review dimension of the IEP process and challenging the usual team dynamics. On the other hand, the presence of students was found positive because they would be able to pick up additional information and bring another perspective that would complement the other team members' perspectives, especially in the areas of teaching and learning, and student life.

Eventually, eight students participated in IEP evaluations during a pilot phase (2006-2008), in evaluations where the institution asked for a student evaluator and the team chair agreed with it. The practice was monitored and assessed by the SC, and found positive enough to be extended to all IEP evaluations as from 2008/2009, which was the first evaluation round when all IEP teams included a student member.

All students during the pilot phase were selected through 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, IEP and ESU agreed to have good communication regarding the participation of students: both organisations have contact persons for maintaining active communication and organising a feedback analysis meeting every year.

a. Student recruitment

Every year ESU launches a call for pre-selecting students, and nominates students for the IEP evaluations for the upcoming round, following criteria provided by IEP and agreed by ESU. The IEP SC selects the students participating to the upcoming round from these nominations. The criteria for nomination that are currently applicable are: be a student; be active on a national level or on university governance bodies; and have the appropriate language skills (fluency in English). The nominations should also be balanced in terms of discipline and geographic origins.

The number of students selected varies every year depending on the number of evaluations. IEP makes the final decisions on the selection of students who will participate in the upcoming round, based on ESU's list of nominated students. Any adjustment to the criteria for the selection is discussed between ESU and IEP, before ESU organises recruitment for the next round.⁵

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 of QA, receive regular training, and provide inputs for all QA-related matters where ESU is involved, including serving as trainers in QA at national level and participating in external evaluations (such as for IEP). ESU recruits these students through a call sent to national student unions but

⁵ One example of change in criteria is whether the nominated students should preferably be Bachelors or graduate students. In the pilot phase, the SC asked ESU to form a "small pool of graduate students (MA or doctoral candidates) who are competent in QA matters". In 2011, the SC emphasised that the case of student team members holding the dual role of student and member of staff, as it can happen in the case of doctoral candidates, should be avoided, so that the student voice remains present on the team, and does not become dual. This position mirrors the position of EUA's Council for Doctoral Education, which considers doctoral candidates primarily as early-stage researchers.

open to all through their website. An endorsement by a student union is preferable, although ESU also considers applications and motivations without such endorsement in some cases. ESU nominates students for evaluations after having ensured a proper level of training. The nomination of students for IEP therefore takes place in the broader context of a group that has been gathered based on interest in QA.

About two-thirds of all students who responded to the survey participated in two to four IEP evaluations.⁶ These figures show that more and more 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. This phenomenon has increased since 2011 because of the increase in number of evaluations,⁷ and may be connected to the stability of the ESU QA pool of students.

The recruitment process for participating in IEP appeared clear to 76% of the students who answered the survey, but to some students it did not necessarily mean that it was transparent. Students' opinions are not unanimous regarding the purpose or aim of the recruitment process: some of them would have preferred a fully open process enabling more non-ESU related students to participate, whereas others think it is important that the national student unions decide who should participate; some believe that students should be selected based on their CV and motivation in the field of 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. Besides, 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 of HE systems and the complexity of 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 it was not a problem to cope with IEP and their academic duties, other commitments, and travelling related to IEP. The possibility to have a say on scheduling the visits, and the overall flexibility shown by the teams, the secretariat and the institutions was perceived as helpful. When asked about challenges for students in participating in IEP, the most cited, by both students and non-student pool members, are:

- Adopting the right attitude and tone, and reaching an appropriate understanding of their position as an evaluator;
- The challenge of being new to the process combined with being a new student: while other new pool members may experience the same challenges, students felt that they sometimes needed to showcase their abilities more than others;

⁶ Including ongoing evaluations (2012/2013), but not including planned evaluations (2013/2014).

⁷ Between 2011 and 2014, the IEP is conducting the coordinated evaluation of around 80 HEIs in Romania, in addition to its regular rounds that usually counts 10 registrations of individual universities per academic year. Before 2011, about a dozen students participated in IEP per year, with two to three of them having already participated the previous year.

- Conducting this exercise in English;
- Participating in the drafting phase of the final report. Only 60% of students who answered the survey think that student contribution had an influence on the preparation and drafting of the final evaluation reports;
- Reaching a proper level of preparation, in understanding the country background and challenges related to topics such as governance, and in getting prepared as a team.

c. Training

Participation in the IEP annual training seminar is a prerequisite for participation in evaluation teams, and all students selected in a given year are invited to attend. Every year, a special 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 most of time it is attended by a majority of students, as IEP does not necessarily recruit non-student pool members every year.

When students first began to participate in IEP, some team coordinators or chairs offered mentoring. It mainly consisted of offering advice on how to behave as an evaluator, and showing availability for answering questions on the evaluation process or the methodology. However, it was done on an individual basis, depending on the coordinator or chair, and this practice progressively stopped because it was seen as more and more unnecessary. However, experience from the pilot phase showed that specific needs should be addressed, such as an overview on governance and funding, and briefing on being an external evaluator (including 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 contents being too packed could be heard. Opinions on whether students would need more or specific training are mixed. Some students would like to have special foci on unfamiliar issues such as governance, or specific skills that students could master less easily, such as training on how to ask questions, or how to move from data examination and impression 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.

Despite mixed opinions on possible improvements, almost all students who answered the survey were satisfied with the training and information provided at the annual seminar, and with the complementarity of training opportunities between IEP and ESU QA pool.⁸

d. Student participation in the management of the Programme

As of 2009, the IEP SC has included a student, appointed by the SC based on an ESU proposal of three student candidates. ESU and IEP agreed that the 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.

⁸ 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, not focus on compliance with ESU policy, introduction to common work practices such as how to exchange business cards in an appropriate way, etc.

Two students have participated in the IEP SC so far.⁹ 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 made contributions as any other SC member, and, most importantly, that the student in the SC represents the student view within the pool, not ESU.

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 is then closer to the students' views and students within the institution under evaluation can identify themselves with someone in the team, and feel more relaxed – 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. Non-student groups at the evaluated institutions also felt positive about the student evaluator. Most interestingly, three institutions out of five interviewed related student participation as external evaluators to an opportunity for enhancing student participation in their own governance structures, and student participation in the institution's life at large. One institution also 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.

However, in terms of influence on the content of the evaluation, opinions are mixed. Institutions mostly felt that there could have been an impact, would there be a focus on teaching and learning matters, or 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: pool members see students as integrated in the team as any other team member (97%). Students who participated during the early years noticed that introducing a student in all teams was also a positive learning process for other IEP pool members. However, it was heard several times during interviews that some students felt the need to “over-proof” 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 coordinator, was constantly underlined by student and non-student pool members as fundamental for the quality and dynamics of team work during the evaluation. Also, students were very much aware that their role in the team mostly

⁹ The third student is starting her mandate in September 2013.

depends on themselves and 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 can relate to the students met in the institution in an easier way.

c. Impact on the IEP evaluation process

Whilst the IEP policy is that students should be regarded as any other regular team member, there seems to be, among non-student pool members, two different ways of envisaging their contribution in the evaluation process. On the one hand, the student is considered a good contributor 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 addressing these issues. It should be noted that some students themselves think 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. Moreover, about 85% of students believed that their participation has influenced the way to address student-specific issues, and interviewing students during the visits. Non-student pool members noticed a tendency for the students to focus on these, especially if they are pushed into that role.

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, they found that, in the current situation, it is not 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% answered that it was, 34.3% answered maybe, and the rest answered that it was 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 did contribute to these matters. Further encouragement and support may then 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 on 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.¹⁰ Other than that, non-student pool members in a large majority did not see a difference between the students’ and other team members’ contribution for aspects related to the evaluation process.¹¹ It was pointed out that, here again, it mostly depended 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 in improving IEP in general, it was also specified that it most probably did not change the core philosophy or methodology of the Programme.

¹⁰ It should be noted in this regard that a few students stated they were positively surprised by how much other team members knew about student-related issues.

¹¹ 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.

Lessons learnt and food for thought: ways forward

The inclusion of students in peer-review based evaluations 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. 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 "naturally" active, as well as encouraging them to ask questions in these areas if needed. 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 the expected role of students in the evaluations could also make a useful contribution in this regard.

In addition, support could be reinforced in order to improve student participation. Beyond the question of putting more 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 a support, could be envisaged. ESU is already carrying out training on how to behave as an evaluator, and should certainly be encouraged to continue. Thorough preparatory meetings where the team discusses the structure of the visit, the repartition of roles, and the objectives and expectations from each meeting, even if they seem obvious to more experienced team members, would also help those who are less experienced 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 as to the student participation in QA. In this regard, enhancing collaboration in the framework of IEP would certainly not be the least achievement, as it could also open perspectives for future partnerships, where students would be associated as stakeholders.