13th European Quality Assurance Forum

Broadening the scope of QA

Hosted by WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business) and AQ Austria
15-17 November 2018

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Short bio:
Kay Taaffe was appointed as Quality Enhancement Advisor at University College Cork in September 2017 to provide expert advice and guidance on all aspects of periodic quality review and quality matters to academic, research and support units. Coming from a background in teacher education, Kay received a Doctorate in Education from Kings College London and she has a particular interest in supporting and mentoring students in all aspects of their professional formation. Her background in quality has come from her prior experience of working in three Higher Education Institutions in Ireland, as Programme Director and as Director of Academic Affairs.

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With over 25 years' experience of higher education Elizabeth Noonan has expertise in quality approaches, strategic curriculum, policy and regulatory development, academic development and research project management gained in Scotland and Ireland. Appointed in May 2016 as Director of Quality Enhancement at University College Cork, Elizabeth is responsible for the development of the institution's quality enhancement culture; implementation of effective quality assurance and enhancement processes for education, research and related services of the University; ensuring the integration of relevant national and European policies and guidelines; identification and dissemination of good practice arising from peer review and analysis of the overall effectiveness of the University's quality processes.

Title: Beyond "Diminishing Resources" - Quality Enhancement and Student Engagement

Abstract:
Since the establishment of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in 2005, student involvement in quality processes has been viewed as integral and become more widely adopted across Europe (HEA, 2016). The level of student involvement and engagement can, however, vary on a continuum from students being informed (low-impact) to having decision-making roles (high-impact) (*ibid.*).

In the context of a policy and cultural shift towards an enhancement ethos of quality, this paper presents an institutional case-study at one Irish university, outlining processes to enhance student engagement and impact in academic quality review. The paper outlines initial observations from processes to date (which include training and credentialising students' participation in institutional quality peer review), plans for development based on these reflections, and the potential intended or anticipated institution-wide impact of increased support for student engagement in an enhancement-led quality environment.

Quality Enhancement – local and national context
Concepts of quality are complex – they are value laden and may differ based on cultural, academic, educational, artistic, even financial contexts. Perceptions of quality amongst academics have changed over several decades from once being understood as a concept of academic exceptionality (Marshall, 2016) to a more managerial system of accountability and fitness for purpose. The EQUIP report identifies one of the key challenges arising in quality assurance as "the tension between different perceptions of QA; on the one hand as a bureaucratic process and on the other hand as a means of fostering a quality culture" (Gover & Loukkola, 2018, p.11).

The 2015 Bologna Implementation Plan reports that two-thirds of countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are geared towards quality as accountability and one-third towards quality as enhancement (Gover & Loukkola, 2018). The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) refer to the "twin purposes of 'accountability' and 'enhancement'" recognising that they are interrelated in delivering quality assurance to stakeholders and developing a "quality culture" (ESG, 2015; p.7). Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) defines "quality enhancement" as "promoting and spreading effective practice in an ever-evolving quality assurance system" (QQI, 2018). This acknowledges that both Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Enhancement (QE), while they may be conceptually distinct, are interlinked; Elassy (2015) for example, perceives quality as a continuum where good quality assurance data informs enhancement.

Williams (2016) highlights a dialectic distinction between QA and QE; the former being viewed as focusing on quality monitoring, evaluating and review, while the latter implying augmentation and improvement. A further etymological distinction is drawn between quality as "improvement" and "enhancement" – with "improvement" relating to "a process of bringing an activity up to standard" and "enhancement" being about "raising to a higher degree, intensifying or magnifying" (Williams, 2016, p. 98).

The Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) at UCC adopted the word "enhancement" in its title in 2016. Now in the University's third cycle of academic periodic reviews, this name change represented a shift in ethos and values towards quality as a connected, collaborative and transformative process, embedding enhancement and innovation through self-reflection, expert peer support and dissemination of good practice. In the light of this change, it was timely to explore whether current review processes remained fit-for-purpose to serve this new direction and a comprehensive evaluation of the quality review processes was undertaken, involving the key stakeholders – external reviewers, internal reviewers, student reviewers, and Heads of the Schools which had been involved in quality review.

This paper presents a discussion on one aspect of that evaluation – namely student participation and engagement in the quality review process. Recognising the transformative and enhancement potential of quality review as a "connected" process, the QEU set out to further embed student engagement and participation in the review process in the context of other whole-institution investment and policy initiatives which place a central focus on student learning and experience:

1. The University's Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022, *Independent Thinking; Shared Vision*, which prioritises the delivery of "an outstanding, student-centred teaching and learning experience" (UCC, 2017, p.22).
2. A review and mapping of Student Engagement at UCC (2018), collaboratively conducted by the Office of the Vice-President for Teaching and Learning, and the Students' Union.
3. A recently published Academic Strategy (2018) based on a connected curriculum which "prioritises students' experience of university [that] will facilitate their development of core values and graduate attributes".
4. A substantial capital investment in a Student Hub, due to open in January 2019, which will significantly expand student facilities and centralise student services.

The review of Student Engagement at UCC acknowledges the HEA's contention that, in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) "progressive practices [in Student Engagement] are not always evident" (HEA, 2016, p.viii) and the review seeks to "maximise collective impact, cultivate and replicate what works well, inspire new initiatives and where relevant address gaps or tackle challenges" (UCC, 2018). In light of UCC's institution-wide mission and focus on student experience, it was posited that increasing students' agency and participation in the quality review process could be an enabler in advancing the University's student-centred mission. This paper outlines the initial steps in this on-going process.

Student Engagement
Trowler and Trowler (cited in HEA, 2016, p.3) define student engagement as:

> the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution.

There are many different domains, areas and foci for student engagement within higher education institutions. Gvaramadze (2011) states that the ESG place great importance on active student engagement in HE, however, the explicit issue of student engagement with quality processes appears less evident. The HEA paper on Student Engagement in Higher Education (2016), which sets the context for student participation in decision-making in Irish HEIs, identifies three key domains: namely Teaching & Learning; Quality Assurance; Governance & Management.

There has been an ideological dichotomy in terms of how student engagement is perceived, i.e. the student-as-consumer (market model) and the student-as-producer models (developmental model) (Bishop *et al.*; HEA, 2016). Student engagement within the former model can often be confined to the 'you said – we did' response. In this (student-as-consumer) environment, Klemenčič (2015) points to a risk that students may be doubly disadvantaged when consultation is misleadingly viewed or represented as partnership. In the developmental model, students are viewed as partners or co-creators and co-producers of knowledge. To be effective, this latter model requires partnership-building on both sides – from students and student bodies, and from academics and institutions.

The HEA (2016) identifies different levels of student engagement along a continuum or "ladder" of participation from, for example: informing (non-participation); consultation (tokenism) to delegated power and learner-control (learner empowerment). Levels of engagement can be determined at institutional level, depending on how open and enabling the HEI is towards facilitating students' involvement at different levels.

Ashwin and McVitty (2015) refer to "vagueness and confusion" in the literature on student engagement, citing, for example, that student engagement activity is delineated differently in different taxonomies. They expand on previous schema distinguishing three broad levels of engagement or formation. The first level is referred to as "formation of understanding" (students' personal investment in their own learning); the second as "formation of curricula" (how students participate in the formation of their courses); and the third as "formation of communities" (how they can shape the institutions and communities to which they belong) (*ibid*, p.345). The authors argue that, student involvement in the more complex formation of curricula and ultimately the formation of communities, requires progressive prior experience at each of the three levels to affect appropriate critical understanding, creative thinking

and value judgements; the "higher" levels of student engagement at institutional level can therefore be distinguished from "everyday" student engagement in their own learning.

At UCC, the make-up of peer review panels includes representative internal and external, national and international, disciplinary experts. Students have been participating as reviewers on quality review panels (academic and services) since 2013-14, with at least one student reviewer on every review panel. As reviewers, they are deemed to be full members of the review panel. The QEU liaises with the Students' Union to form a cohort of potential student reviewers, who are normally drawn from undergraduate cohorts, and are required to have some prior experience of representation on class or university committees. Student reviewers are remunerated for their participation and expected to contribute to all the stages of the periodic review. What follows is an account of this student involvement in quality review in a period of readjustment, post-austerity.

Student Engagement in the wake of "diminishing resources"
A report published by QQI on the impact of diminishing resources on quality in Irish Higher Education (HE) found that the lack of resources had reached a "tipping point" and concerns were raised about the impact on the student learning environment, and on learning and teaching (QQI, 2016). Yet this report acknowledged that, despite diminishing resources there was "continued emphasis by institutions on enhancing the student learning experience and … continued commitment of staff to rationalise, innovate and minimise the impact of reduced resources on students" (*ibid*, p.8).

A detailed analysis of the outcomes and recommendations of academic peer reviews at UCC over one academic year (2017 – 2018) mirrored this trend, indicating that there remained a tendency for strategic, staffing and resource issues to predominate – a legacy of an extended period of national austerity which saw state investment in HE contracting, while student numbers increased. The Panel Reports for seven academic reviews generated 162 recommendations and seven themes emerged[1].
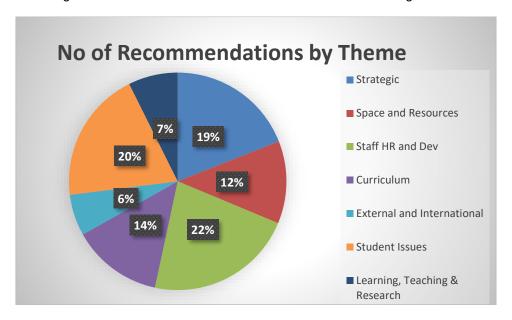

Figure 1: Recommendations by Theme

Figure 1 indicates that 53% of the recommendations relate to strategic, resource and staff issues. A surprising aspect is the relatively low representation for learning and teaching issues. Because the Panel Reports list the recommendations in order of importance, a mean score was calculated for each theme to get an indication of which recommendations were considered most important by Panels (Table 1).

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[1] By way of clarification, a whole institution research quality review (RQR) was undertaken in 2015 and consequently research *per se* does not feature as a significant element of the academic review process – other than research as it impacts on teaching and learning

Recommendations			
Theme	**No of Recs**	**Mean Score & Rank**	
Strategic	31	2.4	1st
Space and Resources	20	5	2nd
Staff HR and Dev	35	6	3rd
Curriculum	22	7.8	4th
External and International	10	9.8	5th
Student Issues	32	10.4	6th
Learning & Teaching	12	12.2	7th
Totals	162		

Table 1: Mean score, ranking themes in order of importance in Panel Reports

Although Figure 1 appears to indicate a strong focus on student issues, it can be posited from Table 1 that recommendations relating to strategic, resource and staff themes ranked higher in order of importance than student issues, and learning and teaching.

There may be a number of explanations for this. Emerging from a period of austerity, the focus on strategic issues is unsurprising because Schools have been largely "fire-fighting" and longer-term strategic planning may have been a challenge, in the light of decreased resources, staff cuts and increased workloads. In relation to learning and teaching, the focus was primarily on dissemination of practice, evidenced in the Good Practice Case Studies presented as part of the review process; this may account for fewer recommendations on this theme.

In order to redress the focus of reviews towards student experience, and learning and teaching, the QEU has initiated additional supports for Schools prior to and post-review. The focus in this paper, however, is on initiatives to support student engagement which include: training for student reviewers; peer-to-peer mentoring; and follow-up focus groups with students on their experience as panel members. One key initiative involved credentialising students' participation as quality peer reviewers through the creation of a Digital Badge, thereby acknowledging the students' experience, competence and skill in undertaking this role of responsibility. This latter initiative set very clear objectives and parameters for participation in quality review. The Digital Badge requires student reviewers to submit an artefact in the form of an appraisal or reflection post review, and this provided valuable qualitative data on the student experience, along with suggestions and recommendations for enhancing the impact of student engagement in the review process. The following is a discussion on the qualitative data from the focus groups and the Digital Badge reflections.

Discussion
The qualitative data from students and student reviewers both during and after the process of quality review indicates some disconnect between the priorities of students and the prioritised recommendations in the Panel reports. The student issues emerging related to "student life and lifestyle", namely: student voice (particularly around programme and module feedback); teaching and learning (including institutional changes [e.g. semesterisation] which have impacted on the organisation of student learning); student supports (at school-level for both undergraduate and post-graduate students); assessment (clustering and feedback); and graduate employability (including placement and graduate attributes). By being ranked lower in the order of importance than strategic, staff and resource issues, a concern would be that the Schools receiving the recommendations might also view these as less important for action. Student recommendations tended to be particular rather than general – at an "instrumental" level (Cheng, 2011) based on specific local issues – and therefore not apparently widely

applicable beyond the context. However, when viewed collectively, the repeated incidence of certain student-related recommendations points to the need for a more holistic institutional response.

While student issues may emerge as being more "instrumental" than strategic, it is evident that the impact of strategic issues will cascade downwards to effect the student experience, and therefore are of immense importance for all students. The student voice in strategic decision-making is therefore critically important. The initiative of digitally badging students' participation, and the increased preparation and training for quality review, should facilitate deeper experiential engagement with institutional processes, and potentially enable students to bring a more strategic and macro-level perspective to bear.

Although the HEA (2016) indicates that there should be both formal and informal student participation in decision-making, student reviewers appeared to have more confidence in the formal mechanisms of the review process than school-level processes, believing the review carried more weight than student evaluation and feedback mechanisms at school-level. One student stated:

> "Being given the chance to represent students at a higher level is always a rewarding task but especially when you get the sense that you can actually make a difference to student life".

One student commented on the "*openness and respect*" that was afforded him by other members of the panel and another student reviewer stated that he *"was given equal freedom and opportunity to contribute as the other panel members"*. He perceived a qualitative difference between having a voice at this "higher level" than at school-representative level stating:

> From discussing the experience of other student representatives (class reps, college report etc.), contributing to policy on issues affecting students is often much more difficult within their own departments. When class representatives voluntarily work tirelessly towards mutual solutions with staff … a lack of support … can be very disheartening for the individual and their class.

The importance of keeping the student perspective to the fore was most important in a changing environment, with one student reviewer stating:

> Our university needs to become more student focused and to begin looking at the student experience from a higher level, this means taking into consideration the student lifestyle. The challenges faced by a student on a daily basis are very different to that (sic) of the students from 20 years ago.

Student reviewers took the role very seriously and perceived a moral and ethical dimension:

> I learnt to value my perspective as a student and not to hold back from asking questions or contributing when it was in the best interests of students … with this task also came moral responsibility … maintaining integrity in the process and standing for the most common voice of students to the best of one's ability.

Student reviewers commented that they got a *"transparent insight"* into how the university works, learning about *"competing and conflicting perspectives"*, and developed negotiation and problem-solving skills. One stated *"I was able to voice student concerns by first addressing the problem in question and then outlining the common goal or resolution to that problem shared by staff and students."*

Another mentioned the transferability, to other professional contexts, of the skills developed:

> The environment created during this review process nurtured my confidence and I will strive to create similar positive working environments in my future work. I've since noticed how experienced and competent clinicians create such environments … I'm now attempting this in my clinical placements and will continue the practice into my internship and beyond.

There was a general view that some level of prior experience in student representation was important, which is in line with the findings of Ashkin and McVitty (2015). One student stated that the biggest

challenge was *"to overcome what might feel like an intimidating situation"*. Another said that the training *"doesn't necessarily prepare for … speak[ing] up in a room of professors and the hierarchy of the university".* Most were of the opinion that inexperienced student representatives would feel out of place; it was a generally held view that student reviewers should have some leadership experience and an *"understanding of current student opinion".* There was also agreement amongst student reviewers that more peer-to-peer engagement would be beneficial, both for their own preparation and during the review process itself.

Conclusion:
The HEA policy on Student Engagement is garnering momentum at national level in terms of collectively moving the HE sector in Ireland towards increased student engagement and partnership in decision-making. At local level, through the recent mapping of student engagement, it is evident that student representation works effectively in many areas; however, the pattern is variable across the institution and work is ongoing to make this more connected. The Panel Reports from quality reviews commended the high calibre and quality of the contributions of the student reviewers, and both internal and external reviewers commented that the student reviewers kept the focus on the central enterprise – namely the student learning experience. Feedback from students indicate a need for increased preparation for student reviewers, including more peer-to-peer engagement, to capitalise on the opportunity of student representation in influencing decision-making. Of course, the responsibility for student issues cannot sit exclusively with the student reviewers and student representation on review panels will form part of a whole-institution focus on student engagement. However, initiatives to increase support and preparation by, for example, signifying the importance of the student reviewer role through credentialisation, may help to increasingly enhance the value and impact of the student engagement. This will be but one of many on-going initiatives towards the objective of ensuring quality is increasingly connected across the institution and moving towards a "quality culture" as a way of being; ultimately towards a goal of making quality "invisible" (Harvey, 2009. p.9).

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Discussion questions:

1. What are the key challenges in building student capacity as active and effective agents in the quality review process?
2. Is parity of esteem really possible between academic reviewers and student reviewers on quality review panels?
3. In relation to institutionally-based training for student reviewers - is there a danger of promoting hegemonic practices rather than facilitating a transformative process which enables students to, where relevant, challenge the "established orthodoxy"?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to
QAForum@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.*