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Taking stock and looking forward

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Short bio:

Beate Tremel is a member of the Steering Committee of the European Students' Union's (ESU) Students Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance. Previously Beate was the International Officer of the Austrian Students' Union (ÖH) and before that she was working in the academic affairs office of ÖH, mainly dealing with questions of quality assurance. Beate holds a bachelor degree in Economics from the University of Graz, Austria and is pursuing her Masters in Gender Studies, specializing in feminist economics and issues of gender equality in scientific environments. She has served as a student representative at all levels of the university's student representative body as well as in several academic committees at faculty, department and university level. Furthermore, she has recently taken up research on quality assurance in higher education, focusing on the students' perspective and their involvement in quality assurance procedures.

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Asnate Kažoka is currently finishing her mandate in the Steering Committee for the Student Experts Pool of the European Students Union (ESU). Asnate holds a master's degree in Information Technology from the Riga Technical University. She has just started working for the Latvian Higher Education Quality Agency (AIKA). Her previous experience includes a position in the administration of University of Latvia and a consultancy position for the Higher Education Council of Latvia. Asnate has held a position of the Academic Affairs Officer for the national union of students between 2010 and 2012 and been in the Board of the previous Latvian quality assurance agency HEQEC since 2010. She has an extensive



experience in external quality assurance in different countries in the European Higher Education Area.

Proposal

Title: Ten Years of Quality Assurance with Students' Eyes – Taking Stock and Providing an Outlook

Abstract:

2015 is not only the 10th anniversary of the ESG and EQAF, but with the Ministerial Conference also the time for a new edition of the European Students' Union's survey "Bologna with Student Eyes". This paper aims at giving an overview of the students' view of the developments that have taken place in the past ten years and provides some detailed insights of the 2015 survey's part about quality assurance. It furthermore identifies the most burning issues for students when it comes to future enhancement of quality assurance in higher education and provides recommendation about how to further improve students' involvement in quality assurance and how to support national student unions in their work on quality assurance for policy makers, higher education institutions and agencies, with student centered learning being one of the most crucial issues for students in the next years.

Text of paper:

1. Background

Even though there were examples of student involvement in higher education policy (also quality assurance) and some recognition by stakeholders already since the 1990s, the main turning point of recognising the importance of student participation was 2005 (Bergen Ministerial Conference) when the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were endorsed. ESG were drawn in consultation with the European Students' Union (ESU) and emphasised student participation at all levels of quality assurance.

Since then countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have paid much more attention to at least formal student participation in quality assurance and reported on the progress before major stakeholder events. The bi-annual Bologna ministerial conference is considered the most important one. Following the formal recognition of student involvement also the student representatives (both in their countries and in the European level) have been more active and demanding in requesting equal and meaningful student participation in all the matters of higher education with quality assurance being one of the cornerstones of it.

2. What happened so far – ten years and seven issues of "Bologna With Student Eyes"

Since the 2003 Bologna Ministerial Conference in Berlin, the European Students' Union (ESU) has issued a volume of its survey-based publication "Bologna With Students' Eyes" on the occasion of every major event of the Bologna Process and EHEA (mostly the Bologna Ministerial Conferences).

It started as a survey with structure and general methodology similar to the Bologna process stocktaking report that is also issued before each Bologna ministerial conference. The aim of the ESU publication was to show the viewpoint of students (as opposed to the general country representatives filling in the questionnaires for the stocktaking report).



The authors of the ESU publication called it “the world of the Bologna process in the eyes of students in Europe” (ESU 2005).

Up to now there have been seven issues of the publication (in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012 and 2015 and an anniversary issue in 2010 called “Bologna at the Finish Line: An account of ten years of European higher education reform”).

The field of quality assurance as one of the “cornerstones” of the Bologna Process has been dealt with from the first issue on and received its fair share of attention in all the “Bologna With Student Eyes” publications so far. The surveys included answers by the national unions of students that were members of ESU at the time of conducting it (45 unions in 2015). The surveys and analyses were done by ESU representatives who also authored the publications. Key issues that were dealt with were students general opinions on QA, student participation in QA but also opinions on EHEA developments like the ESG and EQAR.

2.1. Students’ involvement in QA

In 2003 when the first issue of Bologna With Student Eyes was published 28 unions stated that they have a right to form an opinion on the national quality assurance system. The only exception were the unions from countries without national quality assurance systems at that time. Equal parts of national unions stated that they are either asked for agreement on the final decisions or they are consulted in the process.

The 2005 publication was prepared in the light of the Berlin Communiqué (2003) that had stated that until 2005 the national systems of quality assurance should include, inter alia, participation of students (Berlin Communiqué 2003) but in the end it was concluded that the majority of countries had not properly implemented student participation on all relevant levels.

Only four national unions of students stated that students were involved on all four levels of QA defined back then (internal QA, external QA as reviewers, being consulted in external QA and governance of agencies), while six respondents stated that students weren’t involved at all. In later editions of the survey only three levels of involvement (internal QA, external QA, governance of agencies) were examined. The number of student representatives that perceived themselves as not involved at all had declined, but there still was room for improvement and only student representatives from a few countries saw themselves involved in all aspects of QA on a satisfactory level.

In general, the involvement of students in QA has improved over the past ten years but the 2009 publication (and also the later ones) shows that there is much more critique towards involvement in internal quality assurance than in external quality assurance. That is due to the fact that the legislation on internal quality assurance does not exist (or is not very detailed) in the majority of countries and good practices are made voluntary by individual HEIs.

Internal quality assurance

Students involvement in internal QA always varied a lot between countries and also individual HEIs, as the competence for defining procedures normally lies within the autonomy of the institutions. Already in 2005 huge differences between different levels of evaluation - institution, faculty, programme, course - were perceived. While a few respondents stated, that they were involved on all of these levels, in some other cases student feedback was limited to course evaluations. There was also a great variety in the comprehensiveness of student evaluations and levels on which they are undertaken within HEI, whether the results lead to improvements or if they just end up in a forgotten desk drawer (ESU 2005). This improved a bit over the years, but in general students still perceive their involvement in internal QA as not satisfactory, as also the 2015 survey showed.



External quality assurance

The most significant change can be identified in student involvement in external reviews. In 2005 respondents from only nine countries/regions stated that students were full members of review teams and eleven reported no student participation in review teams at all.

This relation has turned around until 2012, with the majority of countries including students as full members of review teams, in some cases even in the role of chair or secretary, and only a few having students just as observers or not at all involved. This positive development seems to be linked to the proper implementation of the ESG by agencies, especially those listed in EQAR, which shows the importance of international requirements of students' involvement for improvements.

Governance of quality assurance bodies

Students' involvement in the governance of quality assurance bodies has also improved over the last ten years. When in 2005 only slightly more than half of the respondents stated that students were members of the boards of national QA agencies, improvement in their perception of involvement could be detected over the years. Although students are now widely involved in decision-making processes in agency governance there is still room for improvement: only five out of 38 student unions stated, that students are involved in the design of quality assurance procedures.

2.2. Students' general view of QA

Already in 2005 Bologna With Students Eyes detected a generally positive opinion of students on external quality assurance, as they perceived that external reviews in most cases lead to improvement of the HEI or programme. For internal quality assurance there was a different view; about half of the respondents stated, that internal QA doesn't lead to any improvement. This was not only seen due to a lack of resources but also a lack of willingness of administrative and academic staff, something that would be referred to as a lack of quality culture nowadays. Respondents stated a clear difference between internal and external quality assurance. While the latter was already then perceived as rather clear and systematic for the students back then the systems of internal quality assurance were not as transparent and clearly defined. Also, students seemed to have little trust in usual measures of QA as the 2007 Bologna With Student Eyes stated: "Regarding student questionnaires, there have been quite some reports that students often do not see that those have any impact or value. This happens in cases where those questionnaires are not properly and systematically followed up." For many countries this doesn't seem to have substantially changed over the past years. In 2009 students felt that there is a need to evaluate the implementation of the ESG and students concern in relation to the ESG need to be a key input for the process especially in making the internal quality assurance systems effective and compliant with the ESG.

In 2007 some national unions of students mentioned criticism towards a shift from programme to institutional accreditation, fearing that with a mere institutional approach too much responsibility for the quality of programmes is left to the institutions. This has been brought up in 2015 again by unions from countries that have made changes or are planning changes in their external QA system, now focussing more on institutional than on programme accreditation. Students are concerned about a loss of transparency but also about the consequences that might be tied to an institutional approach in accreditation when it comes to funding of higher education.



3. Bologna With Student Eyes 2015

Status quo of student participation in quality assurance

The 2015 BWSE edition sees some of the issues that have existed before but there are also new topics to deal with. When asked about the purpose of quality assurance, students see it as enhancing study conditions, provision of information/transparency, improving recognition and holding HEIs responsible.

Since 2010 the focus of evaluations has moved from programme evaluations either to combination of both programme evaluations and institutional evaluations or solely institutional evaluations. Most of the changes have happened very recently. Students are concerned about abolishment of programme reviews and see the new system as ranking universities and dividing them in "good" and "bad". There is an indication that these reforms are introduced to justify the budget cuts or limit the transparency.

BWSE 2015 sees a record number of 38 unions confirming that students are involved in internal quality assurance as information source and/or full member with voting rights. When it comes to external quality assurance, 33 unions state that students are involved in external quality assurance as information source (23) and/or full members within the panel (29) but even if there are 3 countries where students can take the role of panel chair or secretary there are still 7 countries where students have only the status of observer. In 28 countries students are involved in the governance of the national quality assurance agency and only in 6 countries they are not at all. In 22 cases students are full members of governance bodies and in 5 cases they are involved even in planning the evaluation/accreditation programme.

The 2015 edition touches the aspect of specific pools of student experts for quality assurance. It concludes that in 23 countries there is a specific pool of student experts that is created with the aim to train students for participation in reviews. In 9 cases it has been established and is operated by the national union of students, in 8 cases by QA agency and in 6 cases it is done in cooperation of the students' union and agency.

The perception of awareness of the ESG reflects the existence of formal requirements of being aware. Students think that in quality assurance agencies the ESG are taken into account seriously (as the compatibility with ESG (both for the agency itself and also for its review procedures) is crucial for the recognition of the agency). In national authorities (that do not necessarily follow the ESG) and in higher education institutions (that in many cases are still autonomous when it comes to internal quality assurance procedures) the level of being aware and taking into account the ESG is rated as somewhat. The most striking is the statement that the local student unions are not aware of the ESG (that means that the HEI's do not position their internal quality assurance procedures as ensuring compliance with the ESG). The lack of information about quality assurance is mentioned as one of the main barriers for student involvement (with 26 out of 38 student unions naming it). The lack of consequences is another general problem for quality assurance and leads to it being regarded as useless by students, as 22 out of 38 student unions stated. Therefore it is necessary, that the transparency of quality assurance procedures, especially internal quality assurance is improved.

Students also feel that they are not seen as full members of the academic community. It is interesting that the challenges have been arranged in exactly the same order of



importance (to what extent the barrier exists) as by the respondents of the Bologna With Student Eyes three years ago (ESU 2012).

17 student unions have stated a clear need for more trainings for student representatives. Many students unions across the EHEA face challenges in organizing trainings due to funding issues despite their will to provide training for their members. Student unions on institutional or national level can be supported in organizing trainings for instance by providing a venue or funding for travelling costs for participants. It goes without saying, that designing and conducting the training must in any case be done by the students themselves, independently from any other stakeholder. However, some examples show, that a short input by a representative of a quality assurance agency can be very fruitful and facilitate communication between students and the agency.

Policy recommendations

The general policy recommendation from BWSE 2015 states that *"Quality Assurance systems should be based on the principles and values of trust, participation and ownership of stakeholders and drive as real improvement. It is important that the revised version of the European Standards and Guidelines are rapidly implemented in cooperation with the national stakeholders. There should be further development of EQAR providing information about quality-assured higher education provision in EHEA, for example, having a database of official degrees (study programmes) offered within EHEA."*

The Bologna With Students Eyes 2015 publication provides a list of recommendations for the further enhancement of QA in the EHEA, some of them are discussed in detail here.

Students should be included in all internal QA related processes

The involvement of students in quality assurance is crucial for its success. Especially in internal quality assurance the involvement of students is often limited to participation in external reviews as interviewees and filling in questionnaires which are often perceived as rather toothless as they are not properly followed-up.

Students' involvement in decision-making

Students must not only be involved in the implementation of quality assurance but also in the decision taking and the design of it. They must be considered equal partners and be members with voting right of all decision-making bodies in internal and external quality assurance and they must be given the right to participate in processes of and decisions on the design of external reviews.

The implementation of the revised ESG

ESU demands a fast yet careful implementation of the revised ESG. Especially the standard on student centered learning is of utmost importance for enhancing quality in teaching and learning. ESU together with Education International dealt with student centered learning already in 2010 in the project "Time for a paradigm change: Student Centered Learning" (T4SCL). The outcome of T4SCL provides definitions and material on student centered learning and its implementation in higher education institutions. More recently, ESU is exploring enhancement driven approaches towards SCL in the project "Peer Assessment for Student Centered Learning" (PASCL). The framework for peer assessment of SCL can not only serve as a template for institutions themselves, but also provide relevant input for the implementation of student centered learning in external review procedures.

Further development of EQAR



28 out of 38 national students' unions are open for further development of EQAR, towards providing information about quality-assured higher education provision in the EHEA (e.g. a database of degrees and study programmes). Not only would this increase transparency but also facilitate degree mobility, which is, despite being very welcome, not much promoted until now.

4. Conclusions and further thoughts

Earlier documents of the EHEA dealt a lot with the establishment of quality assurance systems, as in many countries systems are already in place there are more references to quality as such now, with regard to different aspects of higher education.

Given the complexity of the European quality assurance panorama, despite sharing the common framework of the European Standards and Guidelines, there is not a unique way of promoting and generating student engagement in quality assurance. This fact is very closely correlated to the understanding of quality and what the role of the student in quality assurance should be (ESU 2013).

The mentions of QA now are more about evaluation of existing structures and about more international cooperation in quality assurance, yet better students' involvement remains a key challenge. It is clear that now is the time to make some adjustments to the systems in place and actually tackle the enhancement of quality in higher education by implementing SCL and making structural tools that are of course linked to quality assurance like ECTS and the three cycle system work. The social and political issues arising all over the EHEA are challenging societies and their higher education systems and it might be the right moment for quality assurance to also take other aspects of quality of higher education into account, such as social dimension and the provision of higher education that enables students and graduates to be active citizens.

Student participation remains essential for creating a quality culture in higher education institutions and in reaching commonly stated quality policy goals. It is very important that students are truly equal partners at all levels of QA. Students must not merely act as observers or be kept out of informal decision making arenas (ESU 2010).

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