FOSTERING CREATIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INVITING STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE

Authors

Josep Grifoll. Head of Quality Assessment, AQU Catalunya.

Albert Basart. Project manager, AQU Catalunya.

Concepción Herruzo. Communication specialist, AQU Catalunya.

Abstract

This paper explains the policy introduced by AQU Catalunya,[1] the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (hereinafter AQU), to promote higher levels of student involvement in quality assurance procedures and to encourage their active role in putting forward ideas regarding the future of higher education. The context (strengths and weaknesses) for activating student involvement is set out in the first part of the paper, and this is followed by a series of actions to actually bring this about. A third section explains how students can be trained in quality assurance and quality enhancement to better integrate the different tasks that foster creativity in higher education (in quality assessment, in quality assurance policies, and in their role as individual users and stakeholders).

Introduction

Important new developments are taking place in higher education as a result of the introduction of the Bologna Process as well as important changes taking place in general in society. The impact of new technologies over the last two decades, in particular information and communication technologies (ICT), has led to new demands on graduates, new ways of learning, new areas of knowledge, as well as the accelerated need for curriculum renewal.

University academic staff have an extremely important role to play in this scenario. Moreover, in line with several recommendations formulated at the European level[2] and in cooperation with the Catalan universities, AQU is developing an ambitious programme to encourage actors to be more active in quality enhancement in the universities.

When considered as both stakeholders and users of higher education, students as a group offer great potential in that they can be consulted and an analysis made of their concerns about HE.

---

[1] *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya.*

[2] Prague Communiqué 2001; Berlin Communiqué 2003; Bergen Communiqué 2005; London Communiqué 2007; Leuven Communiqué 2009.

Many students at university also have creative skills that can be channelled towards the quality enhancement of study programmes.

Training students in opportunities in quality assurance and quality enhancement in HE and the introduction of such a policy as a requirement for all HE institutions can be expected to have an important impact on the way that HE institutions work.

The context in Catalonia: challenges facing the AQU programme on student involvement in QA and quality enhancement

The context in which AQU operates has various effects on the student involvement policy. Positive aspects of the HE system in Catalonia in this regard include the relatively small number of institutions,[3] which enables AQU to maintain close contact with them, and the legal framework[4] that supports and encourages student participation in university life and associative activities. There are certain situations in the system however that pose a challenge to the introduction of a more active and, in particular, a more creative role for students in QA.

While participation by students in formal decision-making bodies in universities in Catalonia is encouraged through the existence of a large number of different student associations with either alternative or complementary political profiles and that compete to gain representation, it is important to point out that there is no Student Unions or a NUS as such, unlike other countries. Needless to say, there is a great need for an umbrella organisation of this type that is independent of any particular external political influence and focuses on providing guidance and training for students and their selection for quality assurance purposes.

Nevertheless, a critical view of the Bologna process has recently been adopted by most of the student associations in Catalonia. Some of the points of view expressed by students reflect concern about their future as students and graduates, although this may be a symptom that shows that the explicit objectives and consequences of the EHEA need to be clarified.

The position of AQU as an agent that is active in promoting the EHEA in Catalonia has been complicated, although the situation has proved to be an excellent opportunity for activating dialogue with students and explaining the programme for student involvement.

The combination of these various contextual factors, including the conducive environment for collaboration with institutions and the desire to encourage student participation, as mentioned above, has made it possible for creative approaches to be adopted.

---

[3] 12 universities (7 public and 5 private) and 225,181 students.

[4] Spanish legislation (Spanish Universities Act, LOU 2006) and Catalan legislation (Catalan Universities Act, LUC 2003).

Student involvement - AQU strategies

All of the actions carried out by AQU involving student involvement have had the support of the university vice-rectors in charge of student affairs, a policy that was introduced in the AQU Strategic Plan for 2009-2012. Actions undertaken by the Agency include the following:

1. **Students in quality assurance policies:**

   a. Setting up of the Students Commission, a permanent body of twelve students from universities in Catalonia. This Commission is kept informed about the Agency's projects and assists the Quality Assessment Commission in decisions that affect students. It acts as an advisory body on QA from the perspective of students, and it promotes international connections for Catalan students.

   b. A general framework (set of good practices) for student life and participation in HE is to be published in 2010.

2. **Students contributing as individual users and stakeholders:**

   a. A general framework was produced for universities on how to organise adequate systems to deal with student suggestions, complaints and appeals.

   b. Periodic assessments are made of graduate placement and employment (2001, 2005, 2008). 12,553 recent graduates were interviewed in the 2008 study. The two-fold objective of the ongoing survey is for the follow up of graduates once they leave university to be improved, and for the results to be used for the quality enhancement of study programmes. There is a high level of interest in the survey results amongst students as individual users.

   c. Promoting transparency in relation to the quality of study programmes and in particular student satisfaction. Better information on the quality of HE is expected to improve self-regulation processes for quality assurance and encourage student involvement in these. AQU is working with universities to set up a systemic data base with indicators on access, academic results, expected learning outcomes, graduation rates, and student satisfaction rates, etc., which will be available to both enrolled and prospective students.

3. **Students in review processes:**

   a. On self-assessment committees. At least two students were appointed in all study programme evaluations. More than 400 students have been involved in the self-assessment of their studies.

   b. On external review panels. AQU has appointed students as review panel members since 2005. Forty students have been involved as reviewers of study programmes, and they have also been involved in the assessment of e-learning programmes, university libraries, affiliated institutions and university internal quality assurance systems.

c. Students were also consulted in group meetings during the site visits in relation to study programme evaluations. Audiences with them were considered by the reviewers to be highly constructive.

Certain important issues need to be dealt with in relation to some of the actions mentioned above:

- Who are the best students to appoint?

- What is the most "democratic" system for selecting students?

- What is the best way to train students?

- How can the active role of students in a "world of experts" be promoted?

One thing that was clearly evident was the need for a useful tool (training students in QA and quality enhancement) to be developed to deal with these challenges and also take into account the particular context in Catalonia.

Student training in QA and Q enhancement

A multidisciplinary group of experts from Catalan universities was set up in 2005 to discuss the best way to provide university students with the skills and knowledge in order to gain maximum benefit from their involvement in QA processes.

The conclusion was that **it is beneficial for internal and external QA for there to be a significant number of students with an awareness and understanding of quality assurance and review processes**. The experts also emphasised that:

- It is necessary for students to receive specialised training beforehand, aside from the mandatory training given to all experts prior to any evaluation.

- The Agency was lacking the necessary infrastructure to offer courses to a large number of students.

In response to these conclusions, a series of the guidelines were established for institutions that were prepared to offer a course to students and that could, together with AQU, benefit from a pool of students willing to serve as experts on an external evaluation panel.

Students are basically expected to have an adequate knowledge of:

- The characteristics and implementation of the EHEA.

- The methods used to evaluate quality in HE.

- External institutional and programme review procedures.

- Their own university's internal quality assurance systems.

The course enables a student to acquire the ability to analyse the context of evaluation work, to be involved on a panel of experts, and to make judgements concerning developments in the EHEA.

Over the past five years, AQU has signed agreements of collaboration with Catalan universities for the implementation of student training activities. Courses are recognised with 1, 1.5 or 2 ECTS, depending on the institution.

Strategy adopted

Training courses have an open approach and institutions can adapt the course to their specific needs.

The strategy adopted consists of establishing a basic principles document (BPD), which contains the elements and minimum requirements to be taken into account by the institution in the design of the course. A second important point in the strategy involves the funding of the course: if the course designed for the institution fits the BPD, AQU funds the costs incurred by the teaching staff requirements and the learning materials.

Minimum requirements laid down in the BPD include:

- The institution must define the competences to be acquired by students during the course. The BPD also provides the institution with a suggested list of competences.

- The design of the course needs to include the learning activities and the sequence of these activities. The institution must also specify the method used to evaluate each activity.

- The learning activities and the evaluation methods must fit the learning outcomes.

- The institution must define the course eligibility criteria in order to attract students who are interested in participating in quality processes.

- The institution must define the teaching staff on the course. It is important for QA staff/specialists to be involved. An international student can provide an external perspective of the subject (on this point, collaboration has been set in motion with the European Students' Union (ESU) to comply with this important requirement).

- The last requirement concerns the results of the course, which must be sent by the institution to AQU. The document consists of the academic results, a global report form the institution and the contact list of the students.

Creative approach

This strategy helps to identify various of the called "enablers of creativity" and enables them to emerge.[5] The project implies a considerable level of trust with the institutions, given the sufficient space they have to design an individualised approach to the training. A course provided by a large technical university will differ from one provided by a small private university or one designed for a distance learning university. The project respects diversity and becomes context sensitive to organisational, disciplinary and historical matters.

At the same time, institutions have the opportunity to create and to put the focus on the aspects they consider to be more relevant or appropriate. An example is one institution that, in the 2006-2007 period, focused on student participation in the designing of new study programmes, which was a major need at that time.

A high number of stakeholders are involved in the design and development of the training, in a way that is inclusive. Each course involves the collaboration of the vice-rectors in charge of student affairs, teaching staff, QA experts in the institution, QA staff, international students and Catalan students who have already received the training.

The partnership established between AQU and the institutions enhances creativity, and the transparency applied to the whole process makes it possible for an institution to learn from others. One example is where the Agency promotes seminars in which institutions share their experience and learning materials.

The courses also encourage students who have been trained in quality assurance to, in turn, give impetus to creative measures for enhancing and improving both their studies and the institution.

Achievements

The project, which was started in 2005, is currently a consolidated programme in the AQU annual Activities Plan, and the number of universities that has decided to implement the training for student participation in QA processes is growing. AQU signed agreements with five institutions in 2009, and it is envisaged that the programme will be offered to all Catalan universities in 2010.

The figures for the project as of August 2009[6] are as follows:

- The course has been given on 8 occasions.

- The course has been implemented in 3 universities.

---

[5] The European University Association (EUA) launched in 2007 the project *Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda* (QAHECA), in which a group of 29 institutions and agencies examined the nature of creativity, enablers, drivers, etc. applied to QA processes in HE.

[6] There is one course planned for September 2009.

- 150 students have received the training.

An analysis of the project's success should take in various different perspectives.

Benefits for the students

The project enables students to consolidate their understanding of QA and the quality enhancement of degree programmes and institutions. The skills and knowledge obtained in the course also enable them to participate as equals on a panel of experts.

Students also obtain between 1 to 2 ECTS, together with a certificate from the Agency recognising the training's compliance with the European quality framework.

Students on courses this summer were asked about their learning experience, the benefits of the course, and their satisfaction with the training received.[7] In addition to the possibility of participating in quality assurance processes, 70.6% of the students stated that *knowledge and skills obtained have been useful in their academic life*, and 52.9% said that *knowledge and skills obtained have been useful in their professional life*. In addition, they mentioned an improvement in their communication skills (77.8%) and teamwork skills (72.2%). Both skills were top-rated by students as learning outcomes of the course.

There is a high level of satisfaction with the training. On a scale of 1 to 5, the average rating for "Relevance of the course" is 3.11, with 88.9% of students rating the course as either *Relevant* or *Very Relevant*.

In relation to the course topics, the students were very interested in *Quality in HE*, with an indicator of 3.22 on a 1 to 5 scale. *EHEA development* and *The design of new study programmes* were rated in second place, with 3.17 on a 1 to 5 scale.

Finally, 82.4% of the students answered *Yes* to the question, *Would you do another course related to quality in HE*, which is a good indicator of the students' interest in the future of HE.

Benefits for the institutions

In the new European scenario, the *providers of HE have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;* and *there should be encouragement of a culture of quality within HE institutions.*[8]

The involvement of students in internal QA processes has now become normal practise in Catalan universities, and in this context it is beneficial for institutions to have a group of students who are interested in participating and who are trained in QA.

---

[7] Online survey. Dates of the survey: July-August 2009. Population: 130 students. Total completed survey: 15%.

- [8] ENQA (2005). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

The spread of the quality culture within the student community is probably the most outstanding benefit for the institution, however. From the Agency's point of view, the fact that an institution has implemented the course is a good quality indicator of the institution.

Benefits for AQU Catalunya

In terms of the questions posed above (Who are the best students to appoint? Which is the most "democratic" system for selecting students? What is the best way to train students? How can the active role of students in a "world of experts" be promoted?), the training project is a basic tool that can be used to promote the effective involvement of students in QA in Catalonia, as well as at the European level. At the present time, the Agency has a pool of 150 Catalan students and recent graduates who are ready to participate in quality reviews.

One important benefit is the improvement of QA processes carried out by AQU. The perceptions of students enhance external review processes, and there is a significant improvement in the interaction between students and other experts (academic staff, professionals, QA experts) when the students have been previously trained. Furthermore, experts have expressed high levels of satisfaction when asked about the work of students on review panels.

Another benefit for the Agency is the opportunity to disseminate the quality culture within the Catalan HE system as the project offers the Agency the possibility of working with the students as stakeholders.

The fact that AQU has an available pool with a significant number of students who are ready to participate in evaluation processes also helps the Agency to comply with the ESG and the requirements of ENQA concerning external review processes carried out by the Agency.

Conclusion

Over the past 5 years AQU has put considerable effort into encouraging stakeholders (especially students) to become more prominent in quality enhancement in HE. This policy has had a positive impact in that its review processes have been improved and the principles of QA have been disseminated to a significant number of students.

Work still needs to be done to enable the training project to become more widespread throughout the Catalan HE system. Real opportunities for the entire student community to actively participate in quality assurance processes will only exist when courses on QA and quality enhancement are implemented by all universities.

It will be interesting to see what happens regarding the new developments in the EHEA, as well as the experience of other countries that are involved in promoting student involvement in QA. Increasing the interest of students in QA, the exploration of how contributions by students in review processes can be improved, and the promotion of equity in the selection of students are just some of the challenges that will need to be dealt with. And of course it will be much better if we all do this together.

Key issues still to be mastered

- What are the best criteria for selecting students for external QA processes?

- How can the role of the student on review committees be empowered?

- How can the students' interest in QA be increased?

References

- AQU Catalunya (2004). General framework for suggestions, complaints and claims from students. Barcelona: Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya.

- Bologna Follow-up Group (2009). Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009.

- ENQA (2005). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

- ENQA (2006). Student involvement in the processes of quality assurance agencies. Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

- Essomba, M. A. (2005). La formació dels estudiants universitaris per a la participació en comitès d'avaluació externa de titulacions, *Propostes sobre la participació estusiantil a les universitats*, 14th December 2005. Barcelona: Consell Interuniversitari de Catalunya.

- ESU (2007). Bologna With Student Eyes 2007. Brussels: European Students' Union.

- ESU (2009). Bologna With Student Eyes 2009. Brussels: European Students' Union.

- EUA (2006). Bologna Handbook "Making Bologna Work". Berlin: Raabe Academic Publishers.

- EUA (2009). Improving quality, enhancing creativity: change processes in european higher education institutions. Brussels: European University Association.

- Gonzàlez, I. [et al.] (2006). Participació i posicionament polític dels estudiants universitaris catalans. Barcelona: UAB.

- Steering Committee on Higher Education and Research (2003). *Student Participation in Governance in Higher Education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Laws, declarations and communiqués:

- Bologna Declaration 1999

- Prague Communiqué 2001

- Berlin Communiqué 2003

- Bergen Communiqué 2005

- London Communiqué 2007

- Leuven Communiqué 2009

- LOU 2001, Spanish University Act

- LUC 2003, Catalan University Act