

The Future of Quality Assurance: Role and Perspectives of Student Involvement and Student Expert Pools



Steering Committee of the European Students' Union QA Student Experts Pool
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Quality Assurance and student engagement in the European Higher Education Area

The **European Students' Union (ESU)** is an umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students from 40 Countries representing 20 million students from the European Higher Education Area. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. One of the key commitments of the **Bologna Declaration**, starting from the beginning of the process in 1999, was to encourage European cooperation in quality assurance (QA) of higher education by developing comparable criteria and methodologies for the assessment processes. In 2005, The European Ministers of Education have adopted the **"Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)"** and in 2015 the document was revised. Both drafting and revising of the standards was done by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in co-operation and consultation with its member agencies and the other stakeholder groups ("E4 Group" - ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU).

One of the main challenges for the involvement of students as crucial stakeholders is ensuring sustainable students' participation in internal and external QA activities on local, national and international levels. On the level of external QA, one of the most commonly used and structured bodies that facilitates this participation are **Student Experts Pools on Quality Assurance**.

Student Experts Pool:

- Student-led
- Independent
- Provided with resources
- Transparent procedures
- Training opportunities
- Exchange platforms
- Consultation in policy-making
- Link to student unions
- Multipliers in respective countries
- Promoting a diverse representation

In order to create a corresponding structure on European level, ESU established a pool of QA-experienced students in 2009 who aim to contribute to improving higher education provision in Europe through QA procedures. The establishment of the **ESU Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool** is a way how ESU is promoting and developing student participation in QA all over Europe. The pool is renewed once a year and has an independent Steering Committee, which launches the calls for QA activities such as reviews and selects the applicants based on public criteria. ESU organises study sessions, workshops and other events for its pool members. The pool brings together students from all parts of Europe, their experience and knowledge, and is an excellent forum for debating, sharing views and learning about QA.

The unique aspect of ESU QA Pool is its **multinational dimension**. In the term 2020/2021, around 90 students from 28 countries were members of the pool. Participation in various international settings through conducting reviews, training and networking events allows for exchanging practices and broadening the perspective on how QA can be implemented.

Research questions and methodology

Research questions

How could QA evolve in the future from the student experts' point of view?

How can student participation be shaped in the upcoming years?

Which role will digitalisation play - both in educational offers and in QA through digital tools?

How can digital educational offers be assessed through measures of QA?

How can higher education become more inclusive and innovative through internal and external QA?

How can QA develop in the light of globalization?

Which skills do students experts need in QA-related processes?

Think Tank

Format:
Open Space to collect innovative ideas

Timing:
Initial brainstorming
2 times 30 min. breakout session for discussion in small self-led working groups

Survey

Questions:
Rating of competencies associated with QA reviews on a scale for importance
Shift in importance in a digital environment
Comment fields after each section

Survey - Key findings

21 different skills and competencies associated with external QA were rated on a 5 fold scale from very important to not important. In addition, their shift in importance in a digital environment was rated on a 5 fold scale from much more important to much less important.

These skills were subdivided into four fields of competencies:

1. Social Competencies
2. Knowledge and Expertise
3. Self Competencies
4. Methodological Competencies

The evaluation of the single skills and competencies showed the ranking of these, with

1. Active Listening
2. Objectivity
3. Effective Communication

being the highest ranked, and

19. Empathy
20. Language Spoken at HEI
21. IT Skills

being the lowest ranked.

The three skills, which received the largest shift in importance in a digital environment were

1. IT Skills
2. Effective Communication
3. Active Listening.



Think Tank - Key findings

1 Inclusion of all perspectives in QA activities: Student participation and engagement

Recognition of students' involvement

- Increase incentives and recognition for time and efforts of student representatives
- Make (parts of) QA become part of a regular curriculum
- Provide credits for students' diploma supplement
- Support opportunities for students that want to be involved more in QA, e.g. internships or part-time job

Establishing a new 'label' for students' engagement

- For higher education institutions that structurally support students' engagement in the field of QA
- Performance in student engagement and its promotion can become a criteria in QA assessment

Promotion of good practices

- Internal QA should be visible to all stakeholders and students and good practices should be shared among them
- Examples: Include a separate chapter by e.g. the Students' Council in the Self Evaluation Report
- QA training for students that want to be part of internal QA e.g. 'school for student representatives' or course about civic engagement with a focus on student representation

2 Take-aways from COVID-19's impact on the conduction of QA reviews

- Pandemic caused most assessments to move to a digital format
- Importance of having a clear strategy, standardized procedures, and abstract criteria that assure the transparency of the process



- Reflection of (new) digital education formats in the future scope of QA e.g. digital platforms and microcredentials provide an accessible way to short-term skill-training
- Because of the online environment, students have a feeling of isolation and it is harder to engage them to work together for the QA purpose

3 Data-driven QA: From data points towards evidence-based management

- Collecting and interconnecting data allows for:
 - **Student-Life-Cycle monitoring** (connected with the Social Dimension of Education)
 - Chance to define critical points over the study programmes' designs
 - Supporting students when they have issues during their studies
- **Database** creation and data sharing on a meta-level
- **'Real-time' QA** possibilities (instant feedback mechanisms for classes/courses)
- **Automatically generated reports** for statistical data and feeding QA systems
 - Reduction of staff resources for gathering statistical data
 - Focus and resources on the implementation part
- Bear in mind data protection and privacy and biases when it comes to the 'objectiveness' and inclusiveness of algorithms

4 Widen the scope: Internationalisation and globalisation of QA

- Potential of QA in a supra/transnational educational context
- European Universities Initiative and their overarching QA systems as a pilot project in the field of transnationally embedded QA
- Involvement of various stakeholders in the boards and QA processes
 - More institutional and holistic scope of the assessment
- National QA can profit from international QA experience; however the national context cannot be replaced, since the systems are embedded in a country's legislation and history
- International experts need the corresponding skills to assess international programmes, institutions and cooperations

5 Diversity perspectives on learning and teaching: How can QA bring the inclusion agenda forwards?

- Inclusion is yet to be achieved on the academic level in **student representative bodies**
- The topic of inclusivity is broadly discussed but the full implementation is lacking due to insufficient HEIs' **support systems, campaigning** and the underdeveloped **inclusive academic mindset**
- Within the scope of QA, it is important to address, not only the presence, but also the **quality of student support services**, by interviewing their users in reviews
- When **creating a programme or opening a new institution**, **inclusivity** must be one of the priorities with clear mention of proposed measures to assure it
 - Diversity sensitive curricula
 - Guaranteed academic freedom
 - Inclusive learning tools
 - Higher flexibility of education
 - Tracking academic progress

Conclusion

Sustainability: Well-functioning processes of recruitment, selection and training of student experts are key for maintaining high engagement of students in QA processes. This way a smooth transfer of knowledge, competencies and skills that are required for QA experts is ensured. This is especially important in the light of the short "student life cycle" in comparison to other stakeholder groups.

Impact: Student experts involved in external QA are also usually directly linked to the student unions on the national and local level, which brings indirect impact on enhanced student participation in internal QA at HEIs.

Partnership: Effective student experts pools play a crucial role in providing organisational possibilities to offer platforms for students and QA stakeholders for exchange, support and cooperation.

Consultation: The role of the student experts has been invaluable to the development of new initiatives, QA processes and the enhancement of quality in higher education. However, their engagement in the field of QA varies greatly depending on the national systems - therefore contributing to a discrepancy in internal and external QA approaches, experience and level of engagement. Consequently, we conclude that an increased and structurally embedded involvement of students contributes to the sustainability of QA and its development across EHEA.

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to all ESU Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool members that have contributed with their expertise and ideas for the future of QA from a students' perspective in this project.