



## **8<sup>th</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum**

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**Working together to take quality forward**

**Paper proposal form**

**Deadline 2 August 2013**

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## Proposal

### Title:

**Fostering quality assurance partnerships between staff and students:  
creating leadership skills in student representatives**

### Abstract (150 words max):

A key issue in effective internal quality assurance (IQA) is active involvement of different stakeholders. The role of student representatives is formalized in most institutes for higher education but research indicates that students could need training to learn to deal with power differentials and giving feedback in difficult settings. The aim of the current study was to optimize the input of students within the IQA process by making them true partners to the staff they worked with. In a mixed method design we evaluated students' perspectives on their role as student representatives. 32 students from three programmes participated in the study. Results demonstrated that after the training they were able to demonstrate leadership behaviour and improved feedback skills. Suggestion for improvement was completing the feedback loop towards students during the IQA process. Future research should focus on further optimizing the role of the student representative.

(word count: 145)



## **Text of paper (3000 words max):**

### **Introduction**

A good system for internal quality assurance (IQA) in higher education institutions (HEI's) is characterized by an organization in which the quality assurance procedures are embedded within the organizations structure and are an integral part of the day to day functioning of the various stakeholders within the organization (Dolmans, Wolfhagen & Scherpbier, 2003). The active involvement of academic staff and students within the IQA process leads to the building of a quality culture in which roles with regard to IQA are defined and responsibilities are clear (EUA, 2011; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stalmeijer, Dolmans, van Berkel, & Wolfhagen 2010). It has long ago been acknowledged that the role of students within this process, as consumers of education, is crucial (Coates, 2005). Traditionally they are involved in programme-evaluation by filling out course evaluation questionnaires. They are however also given more profound roles as students representatives within the various official (IQA) bodies (ENQA, 2006). Here they have the opportunity to act as spokespeople for the student body while sharing their unique perspective and providing more rich and in-depth accounts about educational quality than can be generated by standardized, quantifiable, evaluation questionnaires (Little & Williams, 2010).

Several studies report on attempts to involve students in the IQA process (e.g. ENQA, 2006; Spencer-Matthews, 2001). But although the student representative role is formalized in most HEI's not much is known about how students perceive their role and how they give shape to it. Previous research indicated that students sometimes experience difficulty to provide constructive and structured feedback in situations where there are strong power differentials, for example situations in which feedback needs to be provided to course coordinators who are also responsible for grading and pass/fail decisions (Stalmeijer & De Grave, 2008).

Wooten et al. (Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, & Poskus, 2012) described the potential of partnership between staff and students within the process of IQA. Part of the partnership is then to foster leadership skills within the student representatives. Stimulating these leadership skills would not only increase the students' effectiveness in their representatives roles but would help built the students competencies for the future labour market in general (Keup, 2012).

In the current study we sought to build the competencies of student representatives within our faculty by providing them with a theory and evidence based training programme focusing on leadership skills. Furthermore the training focused on quality assurance processes and



characteristics of educational quality specifically. The aim of the training was to optimize the input of students within the IQA process.

We sought to answer the following research questions through a mixed methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004):

1. To what extent do the students feel that the leadership training helped them in their role as student representative?
2. How do the students experience their role as student representative?
3. How do students define success factors for their contribution to the IQA process?

## **Methods**

### *Context*

The study was performed at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FHML) from Maastricht University, Maastricht the Netherlands which predominantly applies the problem-based education model. Within the Faculty, student representatives are part of all the major IQA bodies and management teams. Besides that each programme (Health Sciences, Life Sciences, Medicine) is supported by a “student evaluation committee” (SEC). A SEC consists of 10-12 students who are recruited by the student union. These students form a panel that evaluate each course in a qualitative manner. That is, the group discusses each specific activity and writes a report that (in most cases) is discussed with the coordinator. Besides this qualitative information, course coordinators receive evaluation reports based on standardized student evaluation questionnaires that are administered to all students by a specific (faculty-led) programme-evaluation task force. Based on this information course coordinators are required to make a plan for improvement of their courses. The present study specifically focused on the student representatives organized within the SEC's.

### *Participants*

Participants were all students in one of the programmes at FHML. All participants were recruited through the student unions of the different programmes. We involved all students that were able to participate in the leadership training provided by one of the researchers (WdG) in the beginning of the academic year 2012-2013. In total, 32 students followed the training. These students were typically in the first year of their Bachelor, ages ranging between 17 and 22.



### *Training*

The training focused on information and competences that SEC members will need in order to develop leadership in the process of IQA. The training addressed general topics of quality assurance, key aspects of educational quality and providing constructive feedback to faculty and course coordinators based on evidence based educational theory. During role-play students practiced with critical incidents in their role as student representative for example dealing with staff members rejecting their feedback. In addition to this an electronic learning environment was available for the students for theoretical resources to be used during and after the training. After taking part in the training, students were invited to take part in the study. After a few months we contacted the students once more and invited them to take part in focus groups to discuss their experiences as a SEC member.

### *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was administered to evaluate the training and were filled out by participants at the end of the training. The questionnaire asked students to rate different 16 statements on a five- point Likert scale (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree) (see Table 1). Furthermore four open ended questions asked students to give more specific feedback about the training and describe which hurdles they expect while being a SEC member.

### *Focus groups*

4 focus groups (N= 22 participants, 69%) were used to explore students' experiences as a member of a SEC (Barbour, 2007). The length of the discussions ranged from 60-85 minutes. All focus groups were facilitated by WdG and observed by JW who also took notes.

The discussion was guided by a conversation guide (Barbour, 2007). Examples of questions were "How did you cope as a SEC member?", "What were positive/negative experiences?", "What did you take with you from the leadership training?".

### *Critical incident cards (CIC's)*

After partaking in the training students were asked to fill out CIC's with regard to their experiences as a SEC member at two moments in time 1) two months after the training and 2) directly after the focus group discussion. Critical incidents is a technique derived from the Phenomenological approach and aims to get to the essence of a certain experience or state. In this study the START approach was used (Kessler, 2006) (see also Box 1). 32 CIC's were collected, some students completed multiple, others none.



## *Analysis*

### *1. Quantitative analysis (Questionnaire)*

To analyse the data of the questionnaires we performed descriptive statistics (SPSS 19.0) in order to obtain mean scores and standard deviations of all questionnaire items.

### *2. Qualitative analysis (Open ended questions questionnaire, Focus groups & Critical Incident Cards)*

The open ended questions were thematically analysed by RS and discussed within the research team till consensus was reached. All group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. JW read and analysed the transcripts, identified recurring themes and concepts providing a first thematic analysis. RES then read the transcripts to generate themes. These were discussed within the research team till consensus was reached. The CIC's were thematically analysed by RS and WdG. Themes were discussed within the research team till consensus was reached.

## *Ethical approval*

The study was approved by the ethical review board of the Netherlands Association for Medical Education (NVMO-ERB #204). The goals and procedures of the study were explained to the participants. All participants signed an informed consent. It was explained that participation was voluntary and participants were assured of confidentiality. The participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants received a gift voucher of €20,- as remuneration.

## **Results**

### **Questionnaire**

Table 1 summarizes the items of the questionnaire. Overall, the high scores indicate that participants were very enthusiastic about the training and their role as a member of a SEC (see Table 1). For example, students indicated that they had gained insight in the general principles of quality assurance (M=4.4, SD=.60). Also, students felt that the training was a positive contribution to the personal development (M=4.6, SD=.66). However both the quantitative information and the qualitative information collected with the questionnaire indicated that, relatively speaking, students still felt somewhat unsure about their role (M=3.9, SD=.71) specifically whether they would be able to convincingly give their feedback to the staff and also provide suggestions for improvement. One student described:

[What hurdles do you expect?] *for me this probably will be giving points of improvement to a coordinator, to really convince change is needed*

With regard to improvements for the training the main comment was that students would have preferred to also learn more about providing written feedback

**Table 1: Summary of items, mean scores and standard deviations**

	N	M	SD
<b>Satisfaction</b>			
I am satisfied with the content of the training	36	4.5	.51
The training fulfilled my expectations	36	4.3	.71
<b>Role of the SEC</b>			
My role, as a member of a student evaluation committee, is (has become) clear to me	36	4.3	.61
My general task as a member of a student evaluation committee, is (has become) clear to me	36	4.2	.68
<b>Self-efficacy</b>			
After this training I feel confident to give feedback with regards to the educational quality of educational activities	36	4.1	.69
After this training I feel confident to give evidence-based feedback (suggestions for improvement)	36	4.0	.74
After this training I feel confident to give concrete suggestions for improvement of educational activities	36	4.1	.68
After this training I feel confident to deal with possible hurdles when evaluating educational activities	36	3.9	.71
<b>Knowledge</b>			
I have gained insight in the general principles of quality assurance	36	4.4	.60
I have gained insight in the relevance of students in quality assurance and educational improvement	36	4.4	.69
I have gained insight in topics regarding educational improvements which can be discussed with unit coordinators	36	4.1	.92
I have gained insight in topics regarding educational improvements that can be discussed with teachers directly	36	4.1	.76
<b>Attitude</b>			
I am convinced that students are a relevant component in the quality assurance process	34	4.7	.48
I feel that the training is a positive contribution to the improvement of educational quality	34	4.6	.60
I feel that the training is a positive contribution to my personal development	34	4.6	.66
I feel that the training is a positive contribution to the quality of my CV	34	4.3	.80

### Focus Groups & Critical Incident Cards

Thematic analysis of the focus groups and CIC's pointed to four main themes 1) the art of being a student representative, 2) students demonstrating leadership behaviour, 3) benefits of being a student representative and 4) coming full circle in IQA.





## 1. The art of being a student representative

A lot of comments were made towards expressing how valuable the training had been in helping them formulate constructive feedback (for example, see Box 1). Students described that they really felt that they were able to get their points across in a such a way that the staff member commented on being really able to do something with the feedback. This gave them a sense of accomplishment.

### *A good student representative draws on the powers of many*

During the focus groups it was described how students drew upon the larger student body to get input for the feedback that needed to be conveyed to the staff. Students were aware that they were a 'special kind of student' since they volunteered for the job of SEC member. Therefore they felt an obligation to make sure that they were able to represent the larger student body. To do this they used many different occasions to talk to students, for example after lectures or in the hallway but also organizations on Facebook, to get their opinion about the education as well. This information helped them to formulate rich accounts and in-depth arguments to help improve education.

*Yes, well like during a training, you can just sense the atmosphere among students and then you talk to them and you hear well 'this needs to be changed, that needs to be different', and before I make the report I ask others 'what do you think are points for improvement?'. Because I know of a couple of things, but the rest of the year [student body] should be represented as well. (Focus Group 4)*

## 2. Students demonstrating leadership behaviour

Based on the data collected through both focus groups and CIC's it became clear that students felt they had demonstrated leadership behaviour and that they were entering into a partnership relation with staff member. A partnership with the shared goal to improve educational quality. They did this by creating focus and reaching consensus, dealing with power differential by working together and taking charge if needed

### *Creating Focus and Reaching Consensus*

Both during the focus groups and in the CIC's students recognized the importance of reaching consensus amongst themselves with regard to the feedback they were going to give to the staff. They experienced that when they really prepared for the meeting, specifically formulated the



feedback points and created focus, the chances of the staff member really listening to them and perhaps even doing something with the feedback were augmented.

(...)[Where you satisfied with your behaviour in the situation?] *Yes, I really thought through what I wanted to say and in what way I should say it. Before the training I would have probably just blurted out what I thought, which would have been sometimes the course coordinator could actually do something with (...)* [What will you be able to use in the future?] *I have learned that it really works to think things through before I say them, so not interrupting other people and to think what a solution to the problem could be. (CIC student 5)*

Consensus was also something they wanted to reach with the staff member they were providing feedback to. Especially in the CIC's students described the importance of an open dialogue with staff members where there was room for both the student and the staff perspective. This process was described as 'finding a common ground' with staff members and was seen as a success factor even if it meant compromising once in a while.

[What will you be able to use in the future?] *I've learned how to get to a mutual statement, compromise but don't let opinions get lost, act in the interest of the others. (CIC student 8)*

*During the discussion we ask why someone [a student] has that opinion, and sometimes you understand why and you agree but sometimes not, and then you just have differing opinions but that is ok. But you try to get the most specific, the thing you can really do something with, to take that to the staff member. Yes And also to talk with him about this, because mostly they also have arguments about why certain things can or cannot work, and then it is sometimes possible for us to present them with a solution they hadn't thought about yet. (Focus Group 2)*

### *Dealing with the power differential by working together*

Students commented on the fact that being part of the SEC, being part of a team, helped them to perform their role as student representative better. One example given was that in discussions with staff members it was helpful to be there with a couple of students to help clearly formulate the feedback. In another example it was mentioned that being with multiple students helped to withstand in situations where staff members did not react positively to the feedback. In both situations they got their strength from collaborating with their peers and building on each other's strengths.

### *Taking charge if needed*

In their role as student representative the participants took part in many different meetings with different stakeholders. Both in the focus groups and the CIC's they described learning to see

when it was necessary to take charge and bring back focus to the discussion. This was related to the point of creating focus in the feedback that they gave in order to be as effective as possible when it came to discussing the feedback points with staff members.

*[What have you done?] Tried to not let the discussion get bogged down in details, but trying to focus on the main points, however this officially is of course not my role. Because the idea is to have a tight meeting which doesn't take up more time than necessary, because the course coordinator is a busy person. (CIC Student 18)*

### **3. Benefits of being a student representative**

During the focus group a lot of comments were made about how valuable the skills they had learned during the training were. Not only for their role as student representative but also in other school situation or just in day to day life. They described feeling more confident in the various roles they had. Furthermore it felt gratifying to help to improve education.

*I feel I am more confident now to address someone's behaviour and that I am more inclined to do so now because I know how to do it constructively. (...) It has really helped me, also at my job, when I see there is a conflict and I just know I can handle it. (Focus Group 1)*

### **4. Coming full circle in IQA**

A critical point that was discussed by the students in the focus groups was the lack of feedback from the faculty about the effect their feedback had had on the educational process. They described sometimes feeling frustrated because they did not know whether staff members were actually going to act upon the feedback provided to them. They felt that the organization of FHML had a task there to close the information loop towards the students and making sure that they also knew about the results of the energy they put towards their job as a SEC member.

## **Conclusion**

In order to work on continuous enhancement of educational quality it is important that the different stakeholders work together (ENQA, 2006; Harvey, 2008). The present study suggests that students can form a partnership with academic staff to realize educational enhancement. The training had helped them to be more confident in their role and taught them to give clear and constructive feedback. All in all it had helped them be a more equal partner in discussions, not just in their jobs as student representatives but also on other planes of life. Student representatives felt a great responsibility and were consciously working to create an open dialogue with staff in which the aim was to reach a common ground. Creating focus in their



feedback within the discussion was described as one of the biggest success factors as well as acting as a team while talking to staff members.

This project demonstrated that partnership between students and staff has clear benefits (Shook & Keup, 2012), like getting more in-depth accounts about educational quality. However preparing students for their role as student representative is crucial (Stalmeijer & De Grave, 2008). Furthermore these types of training should be theory and evidence based in order to be able to see effects (Bowden & Marton, 1999).

Future research should further explore the nature of the students' role in the IQA process and seek ways to further optimize the partnerships between staff and students (Gvaramadze, 2011), especially ways to close the feedback loop towards students (Harvey, 2010).

**(word count: 2978 excluding table and box)**



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### **Questions for discussion:**

How can students be actively involved in the quality assurance system?

How can students and teaching staff work together in order to attain a continuous improvement of educational quality?

### Appendix 1

#### **BOX 1: Example of a Critical Incident Card according to the START method**

##### **Situation (Who, what?)**

I met the course coordinator for the evaluation of course X. (...) I attended the meeting together with two other student representatives.

##### **Task (What was your role? What was expected from you?)**

Together with the other students my role was to further explain the comments of the SEC members to the course coordinator. This included stressing some points which we made in our report and listening to the course coordinator.

It was an important meeting since it was a new course; and with all courses this meant that there were points for improvement.

During the (leadership) training we were prepared for such a conversation – for example to stress not only negative points but also positive feedback. We also practiced explaining our view as students to a course coordinator who was defensive. I was able to use this all in this discussion!

##### **Action (What have you done?)**

I started by mentioning the positive points of the course. I also stressed that (some of) these were my personal opinions (which we also discussed in the workshop). I not only mentioned the positive facts, but

I also explained why for me personally they were positive. I found it hard to stress the negative points, but again when I did I explained and tried not to attack the course coordinator. Here I also mentioned a few possibilities in how it could be turned around to a positive thing – or simply provide options on changing it. I then also explained why these other options would be better for me as a student.

At one point I did feel that I was trying to convince the course coordinator about a certain topic.

Unfortunately this was also because this topic was in a quite personal field for the course coordinator. I was able to stress the point that not only I but most students felt like this about this topic and why.

However, the course coordinator did not seem satisfied with the 'why'.

**Results:**

This was my first meeting with a course coordinator, and I was quite nervous. However, I felt that it was quite an efficient meeting and the course coordinator was willing to listen and interested in hearing our point of view.

I did feel that the course coordinator was also quite nervous (which I noticed from his body language) – and I found it hard to deal with this 9as this also made it harder in pointing out negative opinions) (...).

**Reflection (Were you satisfied with your behaviour in the situation?):**

In general I was satisfied (and relieved) with how the meeting went. However, I felt that I was too nice and was scared that this may have affected the points I wanted to stress. I was however very glad that I had had the workshop – I felt it had really prepared and aided me in making the meeting successful.

**Transfer (What will you be able to use in the future/other situations? How would you deal with the situation?)**

I am still nervous about meeting a course coordinator who is not willing to listen to my point of view – in this I need more experience. Most of what I discussed I can use again in future meetings.

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga ([Ivana.Juraga@eua.be](mailto:Ivana.Juraga@eua.be)). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*