Building bridges:
Making sense of quality assurance in European, national and institutional contexts

A selection of papers from the 5th European Quality Assurance Forum

18-20 November 2010
Hosted by University Claude Bernard Lyon 1, France

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Edited by:
Andrea Blättler, Lucien Bollaert, Fiona Crozier, Josep Grifoll, Áine Hyland,
Tia Loukkola, Barbara Michalk, Allan Päll and Bjørn Stensaker

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The idea of a European Quality Assurance Forum was proposed by EUA to the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) in 2003. The proposal for an annual European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) grew from the observation that the dialogue among quality assurance (QA) agencies, higher education institutions and students was happening at national rather than at European level. Thus, it seemed important to create an annual European event that gathers all actors in order to discuss matters of quality and quality assurance in the context of the changing higher education landscape, examine European and international QA trends, and improve the articulation between quality culture and external accountability.

Since the first EQAF was organised in 2006, the organisers have been delighted to notice that the event has established its role as the main annual discussion forum for all interested parties in the field of European QA. The fifth Forum, hosted by University Claude Bernard Lyon I, France focused upon "Building Bridges: making sense of QA in European, national and institutional contexts". 450 forum participants from approximately 50 countries included academics and administrators responsible for internal quality, students, representatives from QA agencies, national authorities, intergovernmental organisations and researchers in quality development in higher education and research.

The main aim of the 2010 Forum was to examine how quality assurance tools and processes implemented at institutional and agency level:

- relate to European and national level policy discussions and decisions, and
- interact with and support institutional quality assurance frameworks and quality culture.

This publication gathers together a representative sample of the contributions to the Forum. It includes some of the keynote presentations as well as a few of the many excellent papers that generated lively discussions in the parallel sessions. In addition to the selected presentations from the Forum, the Forum Steering Committee decided to mark the fifth and final Forum co-funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission by including in this publication a short historical account and further reflection on the discussions that have taken place over the years and in particular during this year's Forum. Whilst the Forum will continue next year through alternative means of funding, the Steering Committee hopes that this short account will also highlight the developments and achievements of the Forum to date.

The Forum Steering Committee hopes that this publication will inspire higher education institutions, academic staff, students and QA agencies to reflect on the relationship and interaction between European and national policy decisions and the institutional and agency-level realities.

On behalf of the Forum Steering Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support of this activity: University Claude Bernard Lyon 1 that hosted the Forum with a great sense of organisation and hospitality; those actors in the field of QA who submitted 85 paper, workshop or stand proposals to the Forum; the keynote speakers; the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission which co-funded the Forum and Thérèse Zhang and Joanne Byrne, EUA, who spearheaded its organisation on behalf of the E4.

We look forward to welcoming you at the next European Quality Assurance Forum, and hope to repeat the success of the first five Forums. For further information on the exact date and location, please consult the newsletters and websites of the E4 partners.

Fiona Crozier
Chair, Forum Steering Committee

EQAF – a report from a continuing journey into quality

By EQAF 2010 Steering Committee: Andrea Blättler, Lucien Bollaert, Fiona Crozier, Josep Grifoll, Áine Hyland, Tia Loukkola, Barbara Michalk, Allan Päll, and Bjørn Stensaker.

Introduction

The European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) is fast becoming a tradition in the European higher education landscape. For the fifth time, this report on the Forum provides evidence that the interest in quality assurance (QA) is certainly not fading away; we can also provide examples of new insights, and we identify new challenges on the horizon.

In 2010 EQAF was hosted by the University Claude Bernard Lyon I in France, and focused on the theme "Building Bridges: making sense of QA in European, national and institutional contexts". During three days of lively discussion, the relationship and interaction between European and national policy decisions and the institutional and agency level realities were discussed. As usual, participants also took stock of the progress made in external as well as internal quality assurance processes in past years. As such one could argue that the theme for the forum "Building Bridges …" translated readily into dynamic discussion in both plenary and breakout sessions: the bridge between theory and practice (or finding the best tool for the job), the bridge between national and institutional policy (or finding the best way to enhance quality whilst conforming to external quality assurance requirements) and the bridge between the European dimension of quality assurance and national policy (or convergence versus compatibility) were all hot topics for discussion.

But EQAF does not only build bridges between different discussion topics; it is the only European forum where students, staff from higher education institutions (both academics and staff from quality assurance units) and quality assurance agencies meet. It is an opportunity for students to ask quality assurance agencies how and why national policies are determined; for staff from higher education institutions to ask students from other parts of Europe how they perceive quality assurance in their context; for academic staff to interact with those working in quality assurance higher education institutional units or agencies.

Throughout the five years that EQAF has been in existence, those bridges have become stronger and more numerous. The level of common understanding of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and cooperation between the different actors involved is increasing and the significance of that outcome should not be underestimated. In short, the metaphor of a bridge might be applied to EQAF itself. Hence, in this somewhat extended introduction to the conference proceedings we also want to take stock of the Forum – both concerning our understandings of past accomplishments, and future directions. By looking back at EQAF we would argue that we not only look back at a particular conference but also at a moving landscape, and our journey through that landscape. By looking forward, we can perhaps also identify the trends that will maintain a strong focus on quality in the future.

Some retrospective reflections on five years of EQAF

One of the main themes during the first decade (1999-2009) of the Bologna Process has been quality assurance (QA). The original aim of this process was to build up a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that is attractive worldwide. All those involved quickly understood that in order to achieve the goal of making the EHEA globally attractive QA is of the utmost importance. The fact that QA was and is embedded in the context of the Bologna Process and its paradigm shift from input- to outcome-orientation is an important observation. It means that the development of QA at all levels (programme, institution, national and international) was to follow the same process of implementation as the Bologna Process as a whole,

namely based on actions that the wider community has formulated more or less in consensus and to which decision makers voluntarily commit.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the major decisions on European QA prepared by the E4[1] were taken up by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) and the European Commission (EC) and decided upon by the ministers. The idea of an annual EQAF was proposed by then Deputy Secretary General of EUA, Andrée Sursock, in 2003 to the E4 during the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Hence, it was not coincidence that the ministerial communiqué of London 2007 mentioned progression in the implementation of the ESG, the foundation of the European QA Register (EQAR) and an annual EQAF under the same heading.

> *EQAF brings together the European stakeholders in the field of quality assurance in large numbers. It fosters mutual understanding of principles and policies in quality assurance. And it fosters, step by step, year by year, the development of a common understanding of quality in higher education and of the best way of assuring quality. Compared to other regions in the world this is a unique feature of quality assurance in the EHEA. If EQAF didn't exist, we would have to invent it.*
>
> **Achim Hopbach**, *President ENQA*

In one way or another, the past five EQAFs have reflected the same themes and the same evolution as QA within the Bologna Process over that same period. The first forum (2006) was organised in connection with an international seminar on QA for the Bologna promoters/experts at the Technical University of Munich, Germany. In line with the practical considerations and best practice of internal QA presented at the Bologna seminar, the First Forum focused on internal QA under its title "Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education". Just as in the ministerial communiqués on QA and the ESG, it was stressed that the primary responsibility of QA lies with(in) the institutions, discussions followed on how academics could be involved in QA given its tendency to bureaucracy in relation to measurement and external QA. The fact that there were 350 attendants and almost 80 papers submitted to that Forum proved that EQAF certainly fulfilled a European need.

The second forum (2007) widened the concept of and need for QA by adding the strategic dimension highlighted in its title: "Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy and Practice". At this point the event, organised at Sapienza University in Rome, Italy, reached its maximum capacity with 500 participants. While the sessions provided examples of various QA models and again interesting institutional practice, the necessary extension of QA practice to the strategic choices in a wider social and economic context was part of the discussions. Thus quality culture, enhancement and assurance were not only linked to external QA, but to the international developments towards knowledge-driven societies and strategies of HEIs that would be adequate to meet those challenges.

The third forum (2008) presented a variety of possible strategic QA answers under the neutral title of "Trends in Quality Assurance". For the first time the growing popularity of rankings in the pursuit of world-class excellence was addressed in plenary and paper sessions at the Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary. QA was said to be on the move. Although the tensions between cultures of bureaucracy, enhancement and assurance, internal and external were dealt with again, the European stakeholders' model of QA was linked to democracy in the plenary session which took place in the Hungarian parliament.

It was clear that the fourth forum (2009) hosted by the Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, had to look at the upcoming challenges. Under the title of "Creativity and Diversity: challenges for Quality Assurance beyond 2010" the participants discussed and were confronted with a healthy outside-the-box approach towards the aims of QA, its organisation and methodology, and its contexts. It was concluded that, whereas promoting creativity and diversity are key goals in teaching and research, quality assurance can only rise to those challenges if it creates opportunities for more creativity and diversity through flexibility in its methods and procedures. In this context, it was felt that QA in Europe was entering a new phase, and

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[1] Co-operation on quality assurance between four associations representing key stakeholders: The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

therefore needed new dimensions and ideas. In Copenhagen it also became clear that the world outside Europe was following this debate more and more closely. An increasing number of papers and workshops were proposed by non-Europeans, from "non-Bologna" countries.

At the fifth forum (2010) in Lyon, France, most plenary sessions tried to formulate a kind of state of affairs; new ideas were also debated and discussions were lively in the seminars. The background of the many speakers proved that the stakeholders' model was well accepted, especially noting the increased number of papers by students in contrast to previous years. One of the original aims of EQAF (and also clearly one of its outcomes) was the dialogue between all stakeholders about the need to consider the essence of QA and changing contexts. Therefore, the theme of building bridges was apposite. As a result, the theme of building bridges between internal, external, national and international contexts was discussed bearing in mind the changing future contexts, not the least that of the current economic crisis. The role of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in promoting the European dimension of quality assurance was also debated. While the ESGs clearly have structured the European QA discussion in recent years, some speakers suggested the guidelines needed to be revised. The concluding panel discussion involving the Presidents of the E4 Group, however, outlined the need to evaluate first how the ESGs have been implemented, for what purposes they are currently being used and then to analyse thoroughly their strengths and weaknesses with respect to the purposes identified, before undergoing revision. This issue will be taken forward by the E4 in 2011-12.

A new decade – and new challenges

External quality assurance can be seen as a way to balance academic and political interests within higher education policy. Hence, to get an idea of what the coming decade will bring to quality assurance, a look at what issues are currently at the top of the political agenda can provide us with some ideas. Although the political agenda is very different when looked upon in an overarching European perspective, there are still some trends, ideas, and concerns that stand out in particular.

The first of these is the growing attention given to alternative ways to measure and compare "quality" through various national and global rankings, or through the collection and systematisation of indicators on higher education. For QA this means increased competition for attention and legitimacy. In contrast with QA, rankings appear to provide ready-made, simplified information which is easy to find, and is easy to assimilate. Rankings quantify quality in a way we are used to from other areas in society in a seemingly valid way. While QA reports can be difficult to use as consumer tools, rankings are often viewed as being such tools. The political interest in quality, which created QA in the first place, has been co-opted by a number of other stakeholders and interests that see the potential for multiple uses of QA (Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). One could argue that politicians are striking back through initiatives such as U-Map[2] and other ways to make comparisons more legitimate and accurate. But quality assurance and the recent initiatives aiming to provide more quantifiable data on higher education can sometimes also be seen as more complementary actions. That QA nevertheless will be affected by this development is perhaps the only thing of which we can be quite sure.

A second trend which most likely will impact on QA is the increasing interest in results and outcomes of higher education. There are several drivers behind this agenda. In many countries the financial situation has caused cut-backs in the funding of the sector, and public authorities are more eager than ever to check that the resources spent provide value for investment. Labour market needs and the focus on employability is another driver in which results and outcomes are relevant. The AHELO[3] project launched by the OECD can be seen as one key initiative within this agenda, and given the impact recent PISA studies have had on primary and secondary education throughout Europe, it is not difficult to argue that even in a small scale, a similar "AHELO-test" could bring much turbulence into the European higher education landscape. For QA – which traditionally has had a focus on "processes" rather than on "products" this development could mean that key ideas, foundations and procedures are questioned, and perhaps even discredited.

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[2] www.u-map.eu
[3] AHELO is the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes which will test what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation. More than a ranking, AHELO is a direct evaluation of student performance. It will provide data on the relevance and quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The test aims to be global and valid across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions.

Ideas never changed the world – unless they were implemented. And likewise, the real value of education lies in the knowledge, skills and competencies that remain in the brain and the body of the learner. The Quality Assurance of any education programme must therefore focus on the Learning Outcomes before anything else.

Lars Lynge Nielsen, *President EURASHE*

Finally, while "marketisation" is becoming an increasingly recognised theme within European higher education, one could argue that this trend perhaps will be even more noticeable in the forthcoming decade. The indicators are many and include the tendency to introduce student fees in a number of European countries, the increased competition for students in a more international recruitment market, and the increasing interest among higher education institutions to spend resources on profiling and advertising. In such an atmosphere, QA – especially the activities initiated externally – can increasingly be seen by HEIs as a threat to the desired profile of a given institution, which again may contribute to separate internal and external QA activities. Yet again, combined with the rising desire for tangible results, these trends are closely linked to the need of students to be, in some way, protected in their approach towards teaching and learning, thus undercutting many internal QA practices which are based on a participative culture within institutions. The danger here is of course that a split of QA into separate activities will probably increase the total workload of the system, and lead to accusations that QA drives more bureaucracy and "reporting" without adding value. Potential poor links between external and internal QA could also have a severe negative impact on the developmental potential of QA as a whole.

Of course, we do not know what the future will bring, and perhaps, the coming decade will bring new challenges as yet unknown. However, the challenges already identified suggest that those who see QA as an added value for higher education need to mobilise and defend the benefits of current QA approaches compared to some of the alternatives. The strongest argument for such a defence is perhaps that QA is the best tool for balancing academic and political interests, making sure that special interests and particular perspectives are highlighted in the sphere of higher education.

Some possible directions for QA in the years to come

However, arguing for QA as a mediator between the academic and political sphere does not mean that things should stay exactly as they are. As the world is changing so QA must also change. In such a diverse European higher education landscape, different types of "balances" are probably required if QA still is to be seen as a relevant and legitimate tool for the future. Three such new "balances" are quite easily identified.

While the introduction of QA in many countries can often be associated with the establishment of (quasi-)independent QA agencies, dominating the whole field of external QA, one could argue that globalisation and marketisation will trigger a development of more specialised QA, and more specialised agencies. Within Europe, several more specialised agencies or QA procedures have already been established - one example being the EQUIS accreditation system within business education (Prøitz *et al.,* 2004). Such professional accreditation/evaluation across national borders can be beneficial for those wanting to compare educational providers in an international perspective. With one or more specialised external agencies we could see evaluations that are more valid and legitimate within the disciplines and more specialised academic areas.

However, the growth in more specialised QA and QA agencies does not mean that generic QA is irrelevant. As higher education institutions are increasingly faced with calls for accountability one can also see that there might be plenty of room and need for a stronger link between QA and the strategic planning and actions taken at institutional level. In an era where many universities and colleges are changing their governance and financing systems, there is perhaps more need than ever for activities that can highlight academic values and norms should risk management techniques become too instrumental (Power, 2007). A stronger link between QA and strategic management may have many positive implications for the sector.

It could, at least potentially, improve the follow-up of the many QA activities undertaken. QA could also be used in new ways – beginning as an instrument for stimulating and ending with the realisation of strategic plans and actions. Thus the dimensions of mission, scope (regional, national, international), and link with research become more important in this approach of quality management.

The final direction identified is already a part of our journey – the search for and development of a genuine quality culture within higher education. The Examining Quality Culture project initiated by EUA is perhaps the best known in this respect (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). The idea here is that QA needs to take more strongly into consideration the working conditions and the perspectives of those (directly) involved in teaching and learning, including students as active partners in those processes and that successful QA is an integrated part of our daily routines and behaviour – perhaps not even thought of as QA, although the implication definitely influences the quality of higher education provision. While this is increasingly acknowledged within the world of QA, we should also acknowledge that there is some way to go before the link between QA and the development of a quality culture is free of tensions. While sceptics can indeed argue that the link between QA and quality culture is a fragile one, the question is, perhaps, what is the alternative?

Of course, the three directions identified here are not the only possible solutions for new "balances" in the future. As two recent books have illustrated, QA is still a multifaceted and diverse instrument if we look at how this tool is designed and used in different parts of the world (Dill, 2010; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011).

When EUA first proposed to the E4 members the idea of an EQAF event, we believed there was a real need to offer practitioners and researchers a platform to share experiences in this field that was quickly gaining importance in the context of the Bologna Process. After five Forums, I think it's fair to say the success of the event has surpassed everyone's expectations. Clearly, it is this kind of bottom-up approach that is needed and considered useful by universities. We look forward to consolidating the success of EQAF as it continues to gain importance in European and international higher education.

Jean-Marc Rapp, President EUA

Join the Journey

In this context, we note that the more and the longer we look at the future challenges of QA the more we come to the essence of QA: the management of quality in such a way that it is guaranteed and continuously enhanced. In this way, all the other tools and developments, such as mappings and rankings, should be addressed as in the context of the essence of QA, not changing its objective, but changing its use, its communication and policies. We believe that the right balance in meeting various expectations towards QA can be best achieved through a dialogue among the stakeholders and EQAF has proven to be a useful tool in this work.

Within this report from the fifth EQAF in Lyon, the interested reader will find examples of both challenges and possible solutions with respect to QA in the coming years. Reading the report nevertheless cannot compare with participating in the forum, in the discussions and in the exchange of knowledge and experiences taking place. It is precisely this dialogue that is still an important aim of the forum: a unique event where all stakeholders, partners in QA, can communicate their experience and search for necessary, creative answers to new challenges. More than ever, EQAF provides this platform of exchange – looking back, but also looking forward in the same way the Bologna Process itself is being moulded and realised.

There should be no doubt in quality assurance being of relevance and importance to students as a crucial measure to maintain and improve good quality. But it has become more evident that while quality assurance is making more use of students' input and participation which we of course welcome, the students don't always see the improvement resulting from filling in endless feedback questionnaires or participating in other formalised procedures. Without making the positive impact clear and visible, quality assurance risks losing its relevance and becoming reduced to a mere bureaucratic exercise.

Bert Vandenkendelaere, *Chairperson ESU*

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I. European quality assurance framework transformed to national quality assurance systems

One fleet, many ships, same destination?

Keynote address given at the European Quality Assurance Forum, Lyon, 18 November 2010

By Peter Williams[1]

When I was asked to give this address, and told that I could talk about anything I wanted to, I was really very tempted to offer my thoughts on how to enjoy retirement, a subject on which I am already developing some expertise. It's an activity which needs a lot of training and CPD, much of which can be acquired in a deckchair with a book and a glass of wine at one's elbow. But on reflection I decided that it might be better if I were to look at a subject which has become central to the whole development of the fabled European dimension to quality assurance in the Bologna project – the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, otherwise known as the ESG.

I've called this talk 'One fleet, many ships, same destination?' and should perhaps explain why. Way back in 1993, working for the UK's Higher Education Quality Council, I had the privilege of being a member of the academic audit team that visited the University of Oxford. During one meeting, the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Dick Southwood, described to the team his role as head of the University. It was, he said, rather like being the Admiral in charge of a medieval fleet. He had to try to get a large number of ships, all commanded by their own captains and all with their own ideas and objectives, to sail in more or less the same direction and to more or less the same destination, for more or less the same purpose. There was a lot of the 'more or less' about the task, even, I deduced, perhaps more of the less than of the more (if you follow me). By the end of this talk you will, I hope, understand the significance of the title and, especially, the question mark.

I am particularly interested in the phenomenon of the ESG because, as many of you may know, I was responsible for leading the group that drafted what became Parts 1 and 2 of that document. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the ESG's adoption by the education ministers at the 2005 Bergen ministerial meeting, so I think it is an appropriate mome nt to reflect on their origin, development, use and, perhaps more importantly, their future.

Looking back beyond Bergen, to the 2003 communiqué coming from Berlin, where the first mention of the ESG was made, it still remains a mystery to me how the idea of developing European standards and guidelines for quality assurance could have taken root and found expression without any prior reference to the experts in the field, especially ENQA. The relevant sentence in the communiqué is this:

> At the European level, Ministers call upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation with … EUA, EURASHE and ESIB [the previous name of the ESU], to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.

[1] Former Chief Executive, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom, and Past President of ENQA.

To be on the receiving end of this imperious diktat was to feel confusion. What was this all about? What were these 'standards, procedures and guidelines'? Were they just to be a rulebook to be followed by quality assurance agencies? Why were they needed? How were they to be used? What if agreement couldn't be reached (and it very nearly wasn't)? Whose bright idea were they anyway?

Imperious diktats of this sort are a species of what I call 'magic management'. You see it everywhere in public life. We're getting a particularly heavy dose of it in the UK at the moment. A minister gets an eccentric idea in his or her bath on a Sunday night, and by Monday morning it has become agreed government policy. By Tuesday a decree goes out that it shall be implemented and by Wednesday the minister assumes that the policy objective has been achieved. Meanwhile a chain of confusion and consternation is forged linking the poor people whose job it is to 'make it so.'

In the case of the 'standards, procedures and guidelines' the instruction from Berlin was accompanied by silence. No advice was given on their intended purpose or use, and we had to guess as to how the three words were being defined by the ministers. My later experience of the way in which ministerial communiqués are drafted suggests to me that the ministers probably had little if any, involvement in their invention. Much more likely, the idea emanated from deep within some other organisation, and surfaced quietly at a drafting meeting. Once there, it remained unchallenged and unremarked until it burst up on an unsuspecting European quality assurance community, which found itself facing a daunting new task.

I may, of course, be quite wrong, and the inclusion of the ESG in the Berlin communiqué may have been the result of careful and extensive discussion amongst all key stakeholders, which I alone missed. Perhaps there is someone here today who knows how, and why, the ESG became the most significant element of the 2003 communiqué, at least for this community here today. But in the absence of any publicly available documents to confirm this, I must assume that it was not the case.

At this point I shall draw my own veil over the process by which the ESG, as we now have them, came to be born. Sufficient to say that if the conception was a surprise, then the pregnancy was difficult and so all concerned were happy that the birth, in Bergen, was an easy one.

What kind of baby had we brought in to the world? In the course of the ESG's gestation, two important decisions were made. First, the word 'procedures' was removed. We took the view that, whatever else the ESG might be intended to do, they should not attempt to impose a standard set of detailed quality assurance procedures on agencies or higher education institutions. To do so would have created a single uniform European quality assurance system, which would ignore national higher education structures, characteristics and requirements. The second decision was to bring together into one single document the standards and guidelines for quality assurance, and the 'peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies'. This unifying approach made it clear that quality assurance in European higher education was a coherent and integrated activity, which saw the work of the institutions and of the agencies as part and parcel of a single overarching endeavour.

It was the belief of the authors of the ESG that what they had produced was not a book of rules governing the way universities and quality assurance agencies must behave, but a text intended to provide the starting point for an exploration of the common values and practices relating to quality assurance that could be found across the (then) 40 signatory states. To quote from the foreword of the ESG:

> It must be emphasised that the report is no more than a first step in what is likely to be a long and possibly arduous route to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice in relation to quality and its assurance, by institutions and agencies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). What has been set in motion by the Berlin mandate will need to be developed further if it is to provide the fully functioning European dimension of quality assurance for the EHEA. If this can be accomplished, then many of the ambitions of the Bologna Process will also be achieved.

But this, much to my regret, is not what has happened. From the start, the ESG have been treated as tablets of stone, Mosaic commandments exemplified by their listing in the executive summary. They quickly became a tick box checklist - I sometimes wonder how many people ever read beyond the summary. Our caveats and warnings were not heeded, and the ESG rapidly came to be seen in many quarters as the answer

to the European dimension in quality assurance, rather than as the focus of a continuing conversation or discourse. Some countries enshrined the ESG in their higher education law, requiring their universities and quality assurance or accreditation agencies to conform to them on pain of de-accreditation or (in the most extreme case) abolition if they did not do so. Organisations such as ENQA and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) adopted them as criteria for membership and inclusion. The Bologna Stocktaking Procedure includes specific questions about national compliance with the ESG. On the face of it, the ministers' ambitions have been largely met. We now have a very visible European dimension to quality assurance in higher education.

On one level, of course, this ready take-up of the ESG must be welcome. The working groups that drafted them believed strongly in the principles and advice they contained. They represented the considered views of representatives from many countries in Europe. We had worked hard to try to achieve consensus and to ensure that nothing in the ESG could be simply dismissed as wrong-headed. Even though we knew that some of the standards might be argued about (we expected and, indeed, wished for such a thing), we nevertheless believed that for the most part they would be recognised as a valid reflection of the 'values, expectations and good practice ... across the European Higher Education Area' described in the foreword.

However, while in no way wanting to deny the usefulness of the ESG, I do believe there is a danger in their wholesale and mechanical adoption, endorsement and elevation. In fact there are a number of dangers – or perhaps problems would be a better description. The first is that, although these are European standards and guidelines, they all have to be located within national or regional jurisdictions and adapted to national cultures and practices, if they are to be of any real use. Their supra-national authority is, therefore, ambiguous, or at least, questionable. This shows itself clearly in two linked effects – the problem of local interpretation and the problem of language.

Anyone reading the ESG is likely to do so from within their own cultural context. They will understand and interpret the words in the light of their own experience and of the way their higher education systems are organised and regulated. This will lead to very different perceptions among the 47 states now signed up to the Bologna Process. There can, as a result, be no simple commonly-shared understanding of what the ESG mean in practice. Individual countries will deal with the implications of the ESG as each considers appropriate, and the outcomes, country to country, may be very different. This effect is heightened by the fact that, historically, some of the signatory states are used to the regulation of their public services being based on principles ('principles-based' systems), while others maintain the primacy of the letter of the law ('rules-based' systems). The consequences of these different approaches for the interpretation of the ESG can be profound. In what is probably the most acute example, the idea of independence of quality assurance or accreditation agencies, enshrined in Part 2, standard 6[2], can be interpreted quite differently, according to the type of regulation found in a particular state. For some agencies, their instruments of governance link them constitutionally to their national or regional governments, and the minister is chair of the agency Board. Though this role may be entirely formal, with the minister playing no part in the work of the agency, and posing no threat to the agency's practical independence, it can nonetheless be viewed as a clear instance of non-compliance with the standard. For some this will matter, for others it won't.

Again, there are serious differences of interpretation about the relative significance of the standards and of the guidelines. Is an agency that follows a standard to the letter but ignores the guidelines attached to that standard demonstrating sufficient compliance to be allowed full membership of ENQA or inclusion in the Register? In other words, do the guidelines – which enshrine such doctrines as the use of students and international experts on review panels – have any authority, or are they merely advisory? The ESG document itself is perhaps less than clear on this point:

> The 'guidelines' provide additional information about good practice and in some cases explain in more detail the meaning and importance of the standards. Although the guidelines are not part of the standards themselves, the standards should be considered in conjunction with them.

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[2] 'Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.'

Despite this, the last Bologna Stocktaking required both these guidelines to have been implemented before the highest rating ('green') would be granted. Has the Stocktaking exercise usurped the authority of the ESG? If so, why and how?

Linked to this problem of local interpretation of the original meaning and intention of the standards and guidelines, is the age-old difficulty of the authority of translated texts. At present, according to the ENQA website, there are 12 different translations of the text of the ESG, in addition to the original English text. Among these are two different translations into Albanian. Do those 12 different translations mean 13 different interpretations of the text? Almost certainly. When the ESG were first adopted by ministers an immediate problem arose because the French language had no word for 'standards', in the sense intended by the document. I once sat through a very interesting disagreement amongst French speakers from Belgium, France and Switzerland about how some of the English words used in the ESG should be translated into French. This was very reassuring for a British-English speaker who sometimes has difficulty understanding the English spoken by Americans (or even Australians).

47 countries with more than 50 higher education systems among them, using 13 different versions of the ESG, does not seem to me a recipe for effective harmonisation. When you add to this the number of organisations which now have a stake in the use of the ESG, all of which want to see their use and development in ways of which they themselves approve, and which will promote their regional, national or international objectives, you may begin to wonder whether a single set of standards and guidelines has been achieved at all.

The second main problem with the ambiguous authority that has been granted to the ESG through their widespread adoption has not yet been encountered but, I believe, soon will be. It was not an easy task in 2003-05 for a small group of experts to come up with a draft which, after discussion with other experts, could finally be offered to the ministers as 'agreed'. And it is very unlikely that any revisions to the ESG will be more readily achievable. Indeed, the very variety of purposes that the ESG is now expected to meet raises in my mind the question of whether the ESG can ever be revised satisfactorily. And that will very soon become a pressing issue. When originally drafted, they represented the best that could be done at the time. Since then, and in the light of their widespread adoption and implementation, they have been critiqued and criticised extensively. That is as it should be. There have also been calls for improvements. Again, that is right. Quality assurance must never be seen as a static set of regulations, but as a dynamic response to both the changing world in which higher education operates and its evolving needs. This means that revision will become unavoidable, sooner or later.

There will, though, be some problems to be resolved before, not after, the ESG are revised. Who is to be given the authority to revise the ESG? There are, as I have already said, so many 'stakeholders' with an interest in their use that it will be very hard even to get agreement on who should sit round the revising table and who shouldn't.

What should be the criteria for changing the standards and guidelines? What if there is disagreement between, say, ENQA and the Register? Both use the ESG as their criteria and both share the same review reports on agencies. If they decide they want different standards from each other, who is to arbitrate? What if a revised ESG advocated practice which was opposed to one or a number of countries' higher education policies? Will higher education systems and agencies that are still in the process of implementing ESG version 1 be expected to jettison all their work in favour of ESG 2? It seems to me that the very necessary revision of the ESG is likely to raise so many difficult, if not intractable, questions that by the time they are sorted out it will be time for version 3. When that happens I shall be very willing to offer you all my observations on a contented retirement ...

Some of you may have noticed that in the abstract to this talk I offered up a hostage to fortune by saying that I'd propose an alternative to the ESG, 'these principles turned rules'. That may have been a foolish thing to do, but I shall nonetheless have a go. It seems to me that if there is to be any long-term future for the ESG or a similar set of precepts, there needs to be a fundamental rethink about what they are intended to achieve, and why. In other words, we should apply the fitness for purpose test. The ministers in Berlin in 2003 were strangely mute on the subject of why the ESG were needed: they simply demanded their appearance. We must do better.

Any revised ESG should have as their starting point three main elements. First, there should be some clear rules designed to provide a means of ensuring that all higher education study programmes in the EHEA are planned, provided and assessed in a way that guarantees their conformity with the relevant national qualifications framework. This should ensure, through the national framework's compatibility with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, both their inherent value and quality, and their acceptability for employment or further study across the EHEA.

Secondly, the revised ESG should propose that quality assurance and accreditation agencies fulfil two main functions: to ensure that the institutions are offering programmes and awards that both conform to the national qualifications framework (their European obligation) and meet the separate needs of their regional or national stakeholders (their local obligation). This should lead to a simplification of the standards and guidelines relating to the role of the agencies (Part 2) and provide a more useful overall job for them to do. Thirdly, there should be a fundamental rethink about the last part of the ESG – the part that deals with the review of agencies. This is needed because of the many uses – sometimes inappropriate – to which the reviews of agencies are being put. As the concepts of quality assurance and accreditation evolve, as I believe they will, so the agencies that run the associated processes must also be allowed to develop. The current standards and guidelines for the review of agencies may soon be too constraining to be useful.

To sum up, I believe that the European Standards and Guidelines were amongst the most innovative and effective achievements of the first decade of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. They have woken up many sleeping higher education systems and have kept alert those who were already awake. But in a way they may have been too successful and the communities that now have great expectations of them are too many and too demanding. The ESG are being asked to bear too much weight. They are also in danger of getting out of date. Their future must involve clearer agreed purposes, a simpler and more focused structure, and distinct elements relating to both European needs and local essentials. Indeed one fleet, certainly many ships, but with several destinations. Any attempt to force them into a one-size-fits-all compliance mechanism covering every higher education institution in the EHEA should be strongly resisted.

And with that call to resistance, dear friends and colleagues, I shall return to cultivate my garden and tut-tut at the follies of the day.

Fifteen Years of Quality Assurance in Europe: Lessons learnt

By Andrée Sursock[1]

The format of my presentation is unusual. Since this audience is very knowledgeable, a chronological and linear presentation of 15 years of quality assurance in Europe would not have been suitable. Instead, I will run through 18 letters of the alphabet to present some key issues that have to do with the changing context of higher education and with some evolving aspects of quality assurance in Europe.

A for Accreditation

Accreditation was introduced in central and eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and moved to Western Europe gradually. Many actors and researchers have argued that the Bologna Process was a factor in the spread of accreditation. Because it relies on a set of criteria, accreditation is perceived as being more rigorous than evaluation and is seen as an effective recognition tool to underpin the European Higher Education Area.

This raises two questions. Is the spread of accreditation, in fact, linked to two phenomena other than Bologna – mainly, the penetration of private providers and the cut and paste tendency of some policy makers? Is there any research to document that recognition is made easier among countries that accredit? I would venture to say that if and when accreditation promotes a culture of detailed examination of educational provision, it leads to the opposite result and weakens recognition.

B for Bologna, Berlin and Bergen

The Bologna Declaration (1999) aimed for high quality education in Europe through a set of common structures and tools. With the Berlin Communiqué (2003), quality moved to the top of the policy agenda and, most importantly, the Communiqué acknowledged the responsibility of higher education institutions in ensuring quality. The Bergen Communiqué (2005) adopted the European Standards and Guidelines, endorsed the European Quality Assurance Forum and gave the green light for the further exploration of the European Quality Assurance Register. These four elements constitute the backbone of the European dimension for quality assurance.

C for Change

There has been very significant change across Europe in the past decade. This had to do with a significant rise in the number of enrolled students and a corresponding increase in the number of institutions, mostly private or church-funded. In addition, most countries in Europe have introduced at least three significant new policies alongside the Bologna Process, which affect research, the scope of institutional autonomy, funding modalities, career structures, governance, etc. (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). To what extent are current quality assurance (QA) processes accompanying and supporting these far-reaching changes?

D for Dialogue

Dialogue between QA agencies and higher education institutions was a central feature of evaluation in the 80's and 90's and a way to build consensus and trust. ENQA's *Convergence Study* echoed this point when it stated that "In order to function effectively, higher education systems require all actors to have confidence in the way the processes within that system are carried out" (Crozier *et al.,* 2005: 9).

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The way quality assurance is designed, however, provides an interesting window into the political culture. Depending on how the democratic decision-making process is conceived – as including or excluding civil society – QA will be underpinned by one of two contrasting philosophies: (i) improvement vs. inspection and (ii) fitness for purpose vs. a uniform set of standards. Amaral and Maassen observed that when academics have a strong voice, the stress is on improvement; it shifts "toward accountability when the will of governments predominates" (Amaral & Maassen, 2007: xii).

In the 80's and 90's, QA was initiated by academics. There was a multiplicity of QA approaches: some focused on input, others on output and still others on process; some evaluated programmes and others institutions. Beyond these differences, however, all approaches shared in common a stress on improvement and fitness for purpose.

Improvement and fitness for purpose are now considered to be old-fashioned words. While I understand the need to change accountability processes periodically, what are we losing when we focus on inspection and standards rather than improvement and a mission-driven QA process? Should we continue to oppose improvement and accountability or focus instead on the common aim of both, which is to ensure that higher education meet societal goals in the best possible way?

E for E4

The E4 – which includes ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE – provides a unique example of cooperation at European level, but one that is not always duplicated at national level. Of the 27 national rectors' conferences answering the *Trends 2010* questionnaire, only eight conferences noted that they were included in a national debate about the European Standards and Guidelines; only nine conferences reported any responsibility in developing the national accountability framework and, for four of these, this is limited to nominations to the board of their national quality agencies. Thus, we seem to have lost the dialogue between QA agencies, institutions and governments.

H for Humility

How do we know what we know? Can we really get to the Truth?

The university hosting this forum is named after Claude Bernard, a French physiologist and the ultimate experimentalist, who made major discoveries about the pancreas, the liver and vasomotor nerves. Claude Bernard had great trust in the scientific process but approached his experiments with a certain degree of doubt. He said, however, *"il faut douter mais ne point être sceptique"*. In other words, he believed that doubt – without scepticism – is a driver of scientific inquiry.

Too much self-confidence can lead to errors and mistakes. This is particularly true in QA site visits because (i) they provide such a short time to get to know and understand the complexity of an institution or programme and (ii) they involve a transactional, complex process within the evaluation team and between the evaluation team and the institution. Here again, dialogue becomes pivotal. It is through dialogue that we gather evidence and then examine it critically. Without a climate of trust, dialogue can be unfruitful and unrevealing.

K for Knowledge

The growing importance of knowledge for society has led observers to comment that universities have lost their monopoly on knowledge production and that a new type of research process has developed. 'Mode 2' research is characterised by new forms of transdisciplinarity and partnerships. It is more socially responsive, accountable and reflexive than was 'Mode 1' research and it does away with the demarcation line between applied and basic research (Gibbons *et al.,* 1994).

In a forthcoming book, Ellen Hazelkorn notes that "Mode 1 research achieves accountability and quality control via a peer-review process, while Mode 2 achieves accountability and quality control via social

accountability and reflexivity. Whereas Mode 1 relies upon a traditional elite model of knowledge creation, the latter democratises knowledge production, application and exchange" (Hazelkorn, forthcoming). We shall come back to Hazelkorn's observations when we get to the letter R.

L for Lisbon and London

The Lisbon strategy set ambitious economic and social goals for Europe that is focused on research and lifelong learning, the democratisation of higher education and the modernisation agenda for universities.

The London Communiqué (2007) endorsed the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) as a tool to create the European Higher Education Area by stressing the European rather than the national dimension of QA processes.

M for Mergers (and cross-border activities)

In the past decade, there has been growing number of mergers, associations or federations of higher education institutions in Europe as well as a growing number of cross-border partnerships and transnational educational activities within Europe. The fact that institutional boundaries have become more porous must have implications for QA. Should QA processes remain focused at the micro level (programme) or even the institutional level or move to a higher unit of analysis by embracing the range of institutional partnerships and cross-border activities?

O for Order

The QA field has been very dynamic in Europe but the changes that have been introduced have led to an accumulation of different quality assurance processes. Nearly 90% of respondents to a recent ENQA survey report that their procedures include now several types of evaluation or accreditation – often programme evaluation/accreditation combined with institutional evaluation/accreditation or audits (ENQA, 2008: 25-26).

In this context, we should remember Paul Valéry's astute observation that "two dangers threaten the world: disorder and order". Is too much order a good outcome for higher education? Are we able to strike the appropriate balance between consistency in accountability procedures vs. institutional diversity and creativity? Are we able to avoid the twin dangers of too much disorder and too much order?

P for Power and Q for Quality

Many observers and researchers have noted that quality is not a neutral concept, but closely related to questions of ideology and power. It is about who defines quality and in which ways (e.g., Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). Harvey and Williams (2010: 7) note "that analysis of quality should not be detached from purpose and context and that quality has political dimensions and is about more than (consumer) satisfaction".

Quality assurance – which must be distinguished from quality – is a tool for addressing the complexities of European higher education. Europe has defined a set of shared principles but there is no shared definition of quality whether across Europe or even within a single institution. This diversity of definitions must be maintained within a European set of common principles and a common framework for quality assurance.

R for Rankings

There is a clear consensus in the academic and the QA community that simplistic rankings are not a proxy for QA; this was one the conclusions of the Budapest European Quality Assurance Forum in 2008. The

students have been most vocal against rankings. Bert Vandenkendelaere (ESU chair) called them "a disease" and stressed that "excellence is about fostering diversity" (Vandenkendelaere, 2010).

This claim is echoed by Hazelkorn who notes that by relying on bibliometrics, "rankings... reassert the hierarchy of traditional knowledge production" and therefore disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary knowledge. She argues that "By quantifying research activity and impact solely in terms of peer-publication and citations, rankings narrowly define 'impact' as something which occurs only between academic 'peers'" (Hazelkorn, forthcoming).

In response to institutional rankings, there are suggestions to look at the quality of a whole system rather than at single institutions. Thus, Jamil Salmi noted that Finland "has achieved remarkable progress as a knowledge economy, and yet does not boast any university among the top 50 in the world" (Salmi, 2010).

S for Students

Europe has had a tradition of student engagement in institutional governance. The fact that the Bologna Declaration was signed at the University of Bologna – which, in medieval times, was governed by students – was not a chance occurrence but a powerful signal that this European reform intended to put students at the heart of the educational process.

ESU represents a unique and successful example of a representative student association at the level of one region. It has been active in the Bologna Process and in European discussions regarding quality assurance. It has promoted the growing participation of students in evaluations. It must be noted, however, that although students are involved in external reviews in 42 countries their status differs. In particular, students do not shape the evaluation reports in 19 countries (Rauhvargers et al., 2009).

There are two questions that can be raised in relation to students. First, with the changing profile of students, are we defining too narrowly students as members of the 18-24 age group when we consider who should be included in QA processes?

Second, if the Bologna Process is about shifting to student-centred learning, then the examination of student services should become an essential component of quality assurance. The recent EUA study on internal quality assurance (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010) revealed that 75% of institutions that responded to the survey evaluate their student services but the Trends 2010 report showed that student services are relatively underdeveloped in Europe (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Thus, there seems to be a need to examine what else might be missing rather than simply evaluating the quality of provision on offer.

U for Universities

Quality is the primary responsibility of the institutions and has been a historical concern for them. There are many processes to ensure quality internally but these have not necessarily been identified as such. What do we achieve or lose when we call them quality assurance?

Nevertheless, in response to increased accountability demands, internal quality processes have been a major development for 60% of institutions in Europe in the past 10 years (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Institutional success factors that promote internal quality process include: an international orientation, institutional autonomy, the availability of financial and human resources (including staff development schemes), a strong institutional core and appropriate devolution of responsibilities to faculties, and a shared responsibility within the institution. In addition, internal quality must be supported by, and articulated with, external quality processes. In other words, there must be a joint understanding between the institutions and their QA agency about their respective roles in accountability processes.

V for Value and Values

V is for Value, in the sense that the bureaucratic burden of quality assurance must be kept to a minimum and its cost/benefit (including intangible costs such as stress, loss of morale, etc.) must be assessed frequently in order to ensure the engagement of all actors.

V for Values, in the sense that quality assurance must support a vision of higher education and the self-definition of each institution. Most importantly, we must not forget that quality assurance is a means to an end. Therefore, we should try to escape from the dichotomy between accountability and improvement and focus on the real aim of these processes: to ensure that higher education meets societal goals.

X for (e)Xcellence

Having a single definition of excellence is detrimental to achieving societal goals. Tom Collins (President of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth) argued recently that "Diversity of institutional missions without diversity of values leads to social failure" in failing to ensure the success of a diverse student body (Collins, 2010). This requires parity of esteem among different types of institutions and, in order to achieve this, parity of esteem must be supported by a diversity of performance indicators.

Z for Ze end!

By way of a conclusion, three set of questions will wrap up this presentation:

• Should we stress excellence or multiple definitions for quality? What of evaluation vs. accreditation? Is it neutral to have a growing role of one or the other? Is one or the other more likely to lead to standardisation and uniformity or to support creativity and institutional diversity? To what extent is there consideration for institutional autonomy and institutional and disciplinary diversity in QA processes? To what extent does QA support the enhancement of higher education? To what extent is QA driven by a vision of what higher education should be in the 21st Century?

• Should we focus on teaching or on the three missions of higher education? Could evaluation of teaching be separated from evaluation of research and service to society? Could they be thought through together and articulated at the level of an institution evaluation or accreditation? In this context what is the future of programme evaluations or accreditations? Are QA agencies focused on study programmes suffering from overload? Even if that is not the case, should the responsibility for ensuring the quality of study programmes shift to higher education institutions?

• Are national evaluations the way forward? Due to globalisation and to progress in building the European Higher Education Area, demand for international and European evaluations is growing from universities, funding agencies or governments. Some QA agencies are finding ways to work within an increasing international environment by entering into cross-border partnerships with other agencies. In addition, the number of European evaluation instruments is increasing. This is positive and should be encouraged. The European Quality Assurance Register has a particular role to play in supporting these supranational, European developments.

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2005-2010: 5 years of student participation in Quality Assurance in Spain

A review about the beginning of student participation in Quality Assurance at a national level in Spain, experiences and future challenges.

By Francesc Marc Esteve Mon[1], Fernando Miguel Galán Palomares[2] and María Cristina Pastor Valcárcel[3]

The implementation of student participation in Quality Assurance (QA) has been one of the important challenges that the Spanish university system has faced with regard to the Bologna Process.

When, in 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted the "Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area", the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) began working to find how students could participate in quality matters, since it did not exist in Spain during those days.

Two years later, for the first time, Spanish students were taking part in an official institutional assessment programme as observer members of the external evaluation committee, and in 2008 as full members in another programme. Today, students are participating in the verification of recognised degree programmes.

This paper aims to review the implementation process of student participation in QA in our country, the achieved goals and future challenges.

Background

Quality assurance policies in higher education have now been in place in Spain for the last few years. In 1992, the Universities Council[4] started an experimental evaluation programme of university quality up to 1994, and shortly after they launched the first National Plan for the Evaluation of the Quality of Universities, 1996-2000 (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1995), followed by a second Universities Quality Plan, 2001-2003 (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2001). However, it was only in 2002 that the Council of Ministers set up the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation. Although it may seem a long time, we must bear in mind that in other European countries there was already a strong tradition of quality assessment; whereas, in Spain, a quality culture is not as rooted and widespread as in northern European countries (Mora, 2003).

Besides, until recently, in Spain students were not traditionally viewed as full members of the university community and, therefore, they did not have the same representation rights as other members of the university community. There are some differences across the sector regarding the participation of students in the university system, although in most universities there are bodies or associations of students, representing the students of each university. Student participation was not formally implemented in all universities, nor was there consolidated participation nationwide (Michavila & Parejo, 2008). This may be one of the reasons why students traditionally have not shown interest in the processes of evaluation and quality assurance systems.

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[4] The Universities Council is a body of the Education Ministry, composed of Spanish university rectors, responsible for academic coordination, cooperation, consultation and proposal of university matters.

The student association that represents the majority of students at a national level is the Coordinator of Students' Representatives of Public Universities (CREUP), and a member of the European Students' Union (ESU). However, in 2005, CREUP debates were focused on consolidating student participation nationwide and in the new structure of higher education, not necessarily in QA. So it can be concluded that the participation of students in QA was not a real demand from students at that time.

Since 1998, the "World Declaration on Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action", the World Conference on Higher Education of UNESCO recognised students as one of the main stakeholders in higher education, highlighting that, therefore, they must be considered key participants and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. UNESCO also considers that their involvement in these issues should be ensured.

The key documents that set out the need for student participation in quality assurance systems within the Bologna Process are those reported in the biennial Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education. Although the statement of Prague in 2001 recognises that students are competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of the EHEA, with their involvement seen as both necessary and welcome, it was not until Berlin, in 2003, when explicit mention was made of student participation in national systems of quality assurance, remembering that by 2005 these systems should include, inter alia, participation of students.

Undoubtedly, the main turning point occurs in the Bergen Communiqué in 2005, where a breakthrough can be observed: the European ministers of education endorse the document "Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area" drawn up by ENQA. This document provides a framework for quality assurance systems and it includes the participation of students in these systems. In this same vein, the statement recognises that most countries have made an effort in the field of quality assurance, but nevertheless progress is still quite slow, particularly with regards to student participation.

Given the above, student participation in QA in Spain in 2005 can be seen not as a real demand from the Spanish students, universities or QA agencies but as a consequence of the Bologna Process implementation in our country.

The design of student participation in quality assurance in Spain, 2005-2007

As noted previously, in Spain, unlike other European countries, quality assurance is relatively recent, although there are great efforts to consolidate the culture of quality. Similarly, in comparison, there is no student representation as entrenched as that found in other neighbouring countries. This is a first hurdle.

It is as a result of the Conference of Ministers in Bergen, in 2005, that Spain began to explore the implementation of student participation in quality assurance. ANECA, aware of the benefits to be gained from incorporating student views in quality assurance policies, began working on student participation. A forum was organised in 2005, after the Conference of Ministers, as part of the effort to introduce student participation. The Forum, "IV Forum ANECA: Students and quality policies", was a meeting point for different agents of universities where they began to debate student participation in quality assurance policies in higher education. In this forum, Raul Gonzalez remarked that, often, students and their representatives are not viewed as mature adults, which hinders their participation.

A few months later, in 2006, ANECA contacted CREUP and other national student organisations, calling for the creation of a working group. The ANECA Working Group for Student Participation in Quality Policies (GATPEPC) was then established, initially formed by staff from ANECA's international and institutional relations unit (3) and representatives of students from several Spanish universities (7). The aim of the working group was to propose possible methods for student participation in the processes of the quality assurance agencies (Galán, 2008).

To achieve the above objective, the GATPEPC was organised into two subgroups: one conducted a search of the existing European documents on the involvement of students in quality assurance processes (Bakken, *et al.*, 2003; Froestad, *et al.*, 2005; Cockburn, 2006) and other useful documents, while the other

analysed the situation of student representation in Spain. The major European references were then analysed, to evaluate the characteristics of existing models, identify best practice and problems, and finally reflect on the landscape of student representation in higher education at the time, and possible future changes.

In October 2006, ANECA hosted an ENQA workshop on the topic "Student involvement in the process of quality assurance agencies". Four examples of student participation in quality assurance agencies and analysis of a survey conducted by ENQA to member agencies on the participation of students were presented at this meeting (Alaniska *et al.,* 2006).

In June 2007, during the process of the ANECA external evaluation carried out by ENQA, the three students who remained members of GATPEPC were interviewed by the External Evaluation Committee in order to assess the commitment that ANECA had towards students.

Also, in early July 2007, ANECA held, in conjunction with the Universities General Directorate of the former Ministry of Education and Science, a Summer School at the International University Menéndez Pelayo (UIMP) that focused on "Student participation in quality assessment". This meeting was for representatives of students, quality assurance agencies, vice-rectors for QA and QA technical units, and sought to create a space for reflection for the active participation of university students in quality assurance processes in higher education.

After a year and a half of GATPEPC work, ANECA invited some students who attended the UIMP Summer School to participate in one of its programmes, the Institutional Evaluation Programme (PEI), during the final quarter of 2007 (ANECA, 2007). It was the first example and experience, nationwide, of student participation in an ANECA programme. This programme was chosen because it was near completion and was voluntary for universities. This time the students, after a training day on assessment tools, participated as observers in the External Review Committee, but for practical purposes the work was the same as that of any other member of the committee.

The value of this experience was very positive for the students, who participated for the first time in such a process, but was also positive for the other members of the Committees and for ANECA itself, who were extremely satisfied and noted an improvement of the process by including this new point of view.

The involvement of students as full members, 2008-2010

It should be noted that in December 2007, ANECA, aware of the successful participation of students in the PEI, appointed five of these students as full members of evaluation committees for the verification phase of the DOCENTIA programme (evaluation of teaching activity). This was the first time in a formal programme in Spain that students participated as full members of committees, a milestone that seemed unattainable only a few months earlier, and especially in such a short time (ANECA, 2008).

In February 2008, several students were appointed as full members of the Evaluation Committees of the VERIFICA programme, whose task is to analyse and verify the new proposed degrees that Spanish universities want to introduce. This participation is significant, since, although it is a process in which other European countries have not included students, the student's point of view takes on an added importance since they are familiar with the quality of university teaching, given that they are the main receivers of this activity. Currently, there are 46 students in undergraduate and postgraduate evaluation committees.

Moreover, in March 2008, the Advisory Council of ANECA invited Spanish university students to attend its standing committee. In 2009, coinciding with the renewal of the Advisory Council, the chairperson of CREUP was appointed as a full member of this Council.

In short, the participation of students in ANECA has grown exponentially over the last two years. Student participation exists not only in the agency's Advisory Council and the GATPEPC, but also in the Quality Label programme for PhD programmes in Spanish universities, in the VERIFICA programme, in the DOCENTIA programme and in the AUDIT programme (drafting internal quality systems for universities). This means that currently there are students participating in all programmes where such participation is necessary.

The regional quality assurance agencies (of the Autonomous Communities) are making efforts in line with ANECA. Some have more experience in this field; an example of this is the Agency for the quality of the university system of Catalonia (AQU), which has included student participation in recent years, with a positive evaluation by ENQA. However, not all have worked along these lines, but it will become necessary to do so in the near future.

The lack of knowledge about quality assurance among students and representatives of students is one of the difficulties that must be overcome. So, one line of action employed is the different training on student participation in quality assurance that has been organised in some Spanish universities based on the "Meetings on Quality in Higher Education" from ANECA. The aim of these trainings is not only the training of students and their possible recruitment to participate in assessment programmes, but also to recognise its importance as a means of disseminating what is known as "quality culture" among students and their representatives.

Review of the experience and vision for the future

At this point, after five years since student participation in QA began improving, it would be appropriate to review the experience so far and to analyse its impact in order to outline the next steps.

First of all, there are some strengths to highlight in each area where students have participated or are participating and which have specific connotations.

On the one hand, it looks at institutional relations: the participation in the GATPEPC that comprises an area of mutual understanding between agency and students, which is also a feedback forum about student participation in ANECA.

On the other hand, student participation in the various programmes is an enrichment of their own process: in the PEI, a remarkable and distinctive element of the programme is the student's role in the site visit of the evaluation committee together with different actors; while participation in the DOCENTIA programme included recognition as full stakeholders by universities and therefore their participation was necessary in the process; most importantly, the VERIFICA programme, within the previous verification process, opens the possibility of universities getting an unfavourable report for the implementation of a degree if this does not include a set of minimum requirements, on which the students, as the rest of evaluators, give their opinion; with AUDIT, the aim is to optimise the design of internal QA systems, in which the participation of students has a wider scope and where participation is particularly relevant since there is a possibility of short-term improvement.

In addition, some weaknesses can be identified.

The procedures for the nomination and appointment of students must be consistent and transparent. A selection profile should be defined; this is an important aspect in order to give more "legitimacy" to students' presence in the process. Establishing a selection profile similar to that used for the selection of academic evaluators is a useful tool. Among the issues to be included in the profile for the effective involvement of students it is necessary for them to have some knowledge of the university system and QA systems, which could be ensured with experience in tasks of representation.

Moreover, training students in specific quality assessment tools is necessary to enable them to develop their roles as evaluators properly, and to be active members of the panels in which they will participate.

Likewise, planning human resources is important because, although the individual student has a temporary status in the time spent at university, the student body as an entity remains. This aspect, which characterises students, is far from being negative; indeed it represents a positive aspect of regeneration and renewal. It is therefore necessary to take into account the required number of students to ensure their continued participation and regular training.

Another action line to step up is the promotion of quality culture, especially among students. It is also important to encourage students already involved in QA to contribute to the training of their peers, so

that the change will not cause generational gaps, and make the training closer and more direct. It should continue raising awareness among students that their participation is important, that they have valuable contributions to make and that their views can help to develop and improve the system.

The development of involved students is an important matter to keep in mind. It's necessary to provide the tools for an effective student participation and to ensure that such participation does not jeopardise any aspect of student development (academic, social, etc.), since it requires extra effort from those are involved.

As can be seen from what has gone before, progress has been made in Spain in student participation in QA processes; however, there are still aspects that require improvement: full participation in some levels which have not yet been reached and, the consolidation of the participation levels that have been attained.

Furthermore, as part of this analysis, it should be also asked whether this apparent progress in student participation is accompanied by real and obvious results.

In general, and so far, the other members of review committees, quality assurance agencies, universities and students have very much appreciated the participation of students in QA programmes. However, although the assessment of this participation is always positive, we can find some clarifications made by each stakeholder (Galán, 2009). Other evaluators, in general, consider that students play a key role in the assessment and especially for aspects relevant to students. In addition, as in the rest of Europe, students usually undertake the role of interviewing other (current) students and graduates. The QA agencies have shown an enrichment of the evaluation reports, expanding and including other aspects not previously taken into account, or which have not been qualified in the same direction. And finally, universities have welcomed this participation, for them it is an opportunity to expand the analysis and therefore to improve their quality.

But beyond the views of different stakeholders, does all this effort to improve student participation in QA affect the daily lives of our universities? Has it been a real improvement in our system? Certainly this analysis, which is outside the scope of this paper, is too early to be undertaken with precision, but it raises a very interesting scenario that could be developed in subsequent experiences.

Overview

For the Spanish higher education system, one of the most important developments provided by the Bologna Process is the establishment and consolidation of quality assurance systems. Quality assurance, according to standards, procedures and guidelines, at European level, constitutes a framework of mutual trust and recognition, both for higher education institutions and for the stakeholders.

As can be seen, the evolution of the process has been quite quick, as noted by the "Bologna Process stocktaking" reports by Bologna Follow-up Group and the "Bologna with student eyes" reports by ESU (2009 & 2010). This has two aspects: one positive and one negative. On the one hand, starting from scratch, genuine student participation in QA has been achieved in record time. On the other hand, this has meant that sometimes the process was running by its own inertia, and some mistakes were made due to lack of good planning.

It is important and necessary to monitor student participation in QA. Specific efforts have been made in this field: there have been meetings for reflection on implementation, meta-evaluation process, or feedback from the various programmes; but there has been no constant and standardised monitoring as such. This is an important aspect for improving student participation. Proper monitoring of student participation will help to identify possible gaps and establish plans for improvement, correcting any weaknesses.

Finally, given the current situation, there is a need to consolidate and institutionalise the participation of students in QA, not only at national level but also at regional ones. One of the challenges we face today is the possible establishment of a Spanish quality assurance student experts' pool, as already exists in other European countries. This would be significantly help to improve most of the weaknesses which have been highlighted in this paper.

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New Paradigm for Quality Assurance

By Jon Haakstad[1]

The stress in new qualification frameworks on *learning outcomes* indicates a 'new paradigm' for our way of assessing higher education. With this in mind, the article discusses the very concept of learning outcome, how it may be assessed and its suitability as a steering parameter. A quick survey of how some 'pioneering' national QA agencies have adapted to the new orientation offers some hints about likely trends in the future.

The main part of the article is a discussion of what changes may – or should – be expected in quality assurance, given the new orientation. It is argued that reference frameworks as well as processes must be affected, as will the relationship between direct and indirect approaches, creating a modified 'hierarchy' of quality indicators. As QA is drawn closer to didactic concerns, more prominent roles must be taken by teaching academics. The relationships between programme and institutional levels, and between internal and external quality assurance, may change as a result of this.

Learning outcome as quality indicator: the background

It is reasonable to assume that the introduction of qualifications frameworks (Bologna Working Group, 2005) and the accompanying stress on students' learning outcomes (LO) must somehow influence existing mechanisms for monitoring and steering higher education, including quality assurance. The attainment of learning aims, always the intended end-point of educational programmes, also becomes the all-important quality indicator. Where formerly a certain learning outcome was (more or less) taken for granted, given the right input, that outcome may now be regarded as the crucial variable, by which the quality or success of a programme is determined. Are we speaking of a paradigm shift?

It is of course nothing strange that the outcome target of a process is also the most important quality assessment criterion. The problem, though, with educational outcomes is that the object of assessment is an immaterial entity. How can institutions monitor and steer according to something that actually happens or exists inside students' minds? And how can educational quality be fairly assessed when this quality is as much dependent on the student's ability and effort as on what the institution actually provides? And with reference to *external* quality assurance, how distant can quality assurance be from the actual objects of assessment – and still make valid observations and judgements?

Since the early days of formal quality assurance there have been discussions about how to assess the contribution that educational provision actually makes to students' learning in terms of 'value added', i.e. the difference in skills and knowledge between the intake and candidate situations (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2004-09). A related concept to describe educational performance is that of 'transformation': the growth in skills, knowledge, maturity, etc. that a student undergoes through an educational process. But will 'process' and 'contribution' be less important concepts now, when it is outcome that matters, in whatever way it has come about? And will it be any easier to assess outcome than 'value added' or 'transformation'?

On the one hand, the present shift of attention is uncontroversial and universally acclaimed. Of course it is the learning outcome that matters; that is why we have education! On the other hand, however, it hides important epistemological contradictions. The early attempts to search for outcome in terms of 'value added' took their inspiration from a complex concept of educational quality and a sceptical view of traditional quality assurance: current QA methodology was looked upon as reductionist, superficial and bureaucratic in the way it dealt with a many-facetted and endlessly changing teaching/learning situation. When seen from this point of view, serious concern with learning outcome implies an open, broad and research-like approach.

But there is also another possibility. Learning outcome – or its significance – may be reduced to a defined number of parameters that lend themselves to measurement. In accordance with aims-directed

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steering principles, outcome may thus become a more easily controllable phenomenon. An obvious association here is the influential international comparisons and rankings of educational performance at the lower educational levels (e.g. PISA, TIMMS). Is the Bologna Process taking higher education in this direction? To quote from a statement issued by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) on the subject of the further development of quality assurance in the Bologna process:

> Data collection and development of performance indicators should strictly adhere to the principles of transparency, readability and accountability of European education, thus allowing for measuring and comparing the strengths of institutions. (.......) Measuring the strengths of diverse institutions across borders will pose an entirely new challenge. To this end compatible instruments for both external institutional assessments and internal quality assurance systems will have to be developed.
>
> (ECA, 2009)

Serious attempts are now being made to investigate the possibility of launching a mechanism to assess – or measure – the learning outcome of higher education provision in a European context. OECD's AHELO project has exactly this aim but starts with an acknowledgement of the methodological complexities that are involved when national cultures and traditions have to be taken into account. OECD therefore approaches the task through an initial Feasibility Study:

> There is currently considerable interest within institutional, political and scientific circles for measures of higher education learning outcomes, but uncertainties and doubts of some actors as to whether it is scientifically and operationally feasible to measure learning outcomes across HEIs of very different types, and in countries with different cultures and languages.
> ....
> The main criteria to assess the success of the feasibility study is to provide a proof of concept that the various instruments considered can be applied in diverse institutional, cultural and linguistic settings with appropriate adaptations and yet provide valid, reliable and free-of – bias measures of student learning outcomes as well as indirect measures of higher education quality.
>
> (OECD, 2009)

Leaving aside the question of how useful a measuring instrument would be, the document gives an indication of the complexity of such an operation, viewed from a methodological angle. At the same time it illustrates the interface between research and quality assurance. Quality assurance (and particularly *external* quality assurance) cannot possibly operate systematically with as great a number of fine-tuned measuring instruments as the AHELO project envisages. Consequently, quality assurance must make less demanding knowledge claims.

But a focus on learning outcomes will still present methodological challenges. Agencies and institutions will have to face the demand that the results of quality assurance should be 'evidence-based'. It may turn out to be harder (or at least more burdensome) to find valid evidence of results/outcomes than of input factors. What will the documented 'evidence' of educational quality look like, if based on learning outcome?

A look around: Can we already see change?

What modifications should we expect in quality assurance to make it fit for a modified purpose? For a start, it may be interesting to see if there has been any impact on national policies and practice so far. A temperature check with a few well-established national agencies may serve as examples. Do we see modifications that indicate a real paradigm shift or will the exercise boil down to political rhetoric and an instance of 'the emperor's new clothes'?

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education has published a new model for the next cycle of external quality assurance (2011–17) (Högskoleverket, 2009). It will be of the programme type and is supposed to rest on three basic indicators: (1) *Intended learning outcomes and the assessment of students* has

three sub-categories, all of them focusing on 'input' arrangements: (a) the 'constructive alignment' (Biggs & Tang, 2007) of input factors with the definition of the intended learning outcome, (b) the programme's labour market relevance and (c) the academic and didactic competence profile of the teachers, (2) *Learning outcome* tries to assess achieved learning outcome, mainly by means of repeat assessments of specimens of student work, (3) *Student experience and student influence* includes two surveys: a student survey will enquire about the students' experience of programme quality, while an alumni survey will test the programme's occupational relevance and the employability of the candidates.

The Danish model is also of the programme type. A new law on the accreditation of higher education (2007) has LO as a central concept[2]. The law defines LO as one of four 'criteria columns', the other three being 'labour market demand', 'research base' and 'organisation and delivery of the provision'. Demand is assessed via employer feedback, while 'organisation and delivery' focuses on the correspondence between learning aims and the needs of the intended outcome on the one hand, and the design of the course on the other. The LO column assesses whether the programme's intended outcome is in accordance with the name of the provision and the relevant degree descriptors in the Danish Qualification Framework. It also assesses achieved learning outcome in terms of formal examination results (which are not re-assessed).

NVAO – the Dutch-Flemish accreditation agency – have also modified their operational approach over the last few years, partly in order to bring in an LO orientation. The agency states that 'learning outcomes are ..... the crux of NVAO's learning outcomes-oriented accreditation system' (NVAO, 2010). In this system, LO is referred to at three levels. The accreditation process will scrutinise the programme's definition of *intended LO* to see if it is in accordance with the Qualifications Framework and general academic expectations. The accreditation process will then assess the programme's *potential LO,* mainly by measuring whether the observed input factors are sufficient to enable students to achieve the intended LO. Finally, *achieved LO* will be assessed by evaluation panels who read examples of students' work as a re-assessment.

Current official documents of the British QAA (England, Wales, and Northern Ireland) describe the evaluation process and objectives without very explicit reference to the new Bologna orientation. Of course QAA's approach is institutional, and as such less directly adaptable to an LO orientation. Learning outcomes are the products of programmes, not institutions. But QAA has always had its evaluations firmly anchored in written documents containing definitions of quality standards at the programme level: their *Academic Infrastructure* (QAA, 2010) documents contain *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications,* where qualifications are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies. QAA Scotland share with the rest of the UK the *Academic Infrastructure* and the institutional approach but may still be mentioned as a particularly interesting case, not least because they are now generally regarded as one of the most enhancement-oriented agencies in Europe. The Scottish main approach is the so-called *Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR)* and it is noteworthy how the ELIR Handbook avoids explicit reference to learning outcomes. QAA Scotland highlights processes rather than outcomes, stressing the student learning experience – and the institution's ability to provide *opportunities* for a good learning experience – as their key concept. This somehow takes us back to the idea of higher education as a transformation process. It also takes account of the fact that learning outcomes depend on the learner as much as on the institution's provision.

These examples indicate that learning outcome orientation is very much on the agenda of national agencies but that procedural modifications so far tend to take place inside established evaluation formats. As could be expected, the adaptation of criteria and processes seem to have come furthest in those agencies that conduct external quality assurance at a programme level.

Some reflections and tentative assumptions

Reference and procedure

External quality assurance must follow defined standards or criteria (ENQA, 2009, para. 2.3). Such criteria must now be re-examined to see if they really reflect the new emphasis on learning outcomes and

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[2] Accreditation procedures are conducted by ACE Denmark (in universities) and EVA (in colleges of professional education). Both are bound by the same law but have developed slightly different sets of criteria.

their correspondence with the specifications in the qualifications framework. Standards and criteria must guide quality assurance processes towards the evaluation of how students' attainment of learning goals is planned, facilitated, assessed and followed up. More specifically, they must assess whether the specified generic skills are really trained and tested in the programmes or whether lip service alone is paid to them in course descriptions and they are otherwise taken for granted. The concept of educational quality as such will not change, but with a change in focus one must expect adaptations in the reference framework – and therefore also in the processes.

The new orientation directs us to the end of the educational process, begging the question of whether quality assurance should take its point of departure here. Provided that we can produce documentation as to students' learning outcomes that goes beyond formal grades (a crucial point!), we might imagine a process that starts with questions like: do the intended learning goals respond to the requirements of the qualifications framework? What does the documentation tell us about the extent to which students actually achieve these goals? Quality assurance may then work its way 'backwards' from the outcome stage into the programme's total design: its process factors, the competence of teachers, infrastructure elements and intake quality, assessing the way in which these factors do – or do not – facilitate the attainment of the defined goals. This could make evaluation processes more targeted and 'clue-oriented' – and possibly less ritualistic.

Direct or indirect approach

However, the approach must (still) be *indirect* to a large extent, with assessments made on the basis of certain indications and assumptions. The alternative – i.e. a *direct* method – would imply one of two options: either simply to trust the formal results that the students' final marks represent, or to create comprehensive systems of repeat assessments. Both approaches have serious drawbacks. Whereas trusting the formal results is problematic in view of what we know about disparities in assessing and marking practice, the comprehensive use of repeat assessments would be burdensome and costly – and might still fail to address educational quality in any deeper sense. But most importantly, it would not increase our *understanding* of quality and would not contribute much to the other side of quality assurance: quality enhancement. So we must not lose input factors from sight. Presumably, it is the educational process that brings about the intended outcome and it is in the input factors of that process that adjustments will have to be made, in order to improve learning outcomes or correct failures that inhibit learning. With little or no information about the characteristics of input factors, institutions will be rummaging in the dark when looking for the right remedial measures, or constructive ways towards further improvement.

Still, the direct element poses a challenge. Quality assurance processes that take their point of departure at the outcome stage must necessarily rely on reasonably trustworthy documentation of what learning has actually been achieved or they will have no solid basis for their operations. We have already seen how some agencies have stepped up their efforts to assess outcome directly; at the institutional level an interesting development is described by Karl-Axel Nilsson (Nilsson, 2010) at the University of Lund in Sweden. In a scheme that distinguishes between 'quality assurance' and 'evaluation', the assessment of student work is a central element. To simplify somewhat, (direct) outcome assessment makes up the quality assurance part, while 'evaluation' mainly addresses the institution's effort and input.

A new hierarchy of quality assurance 'evidence'

As the relationship between input and outcome may take on a new dynamic, certain shifts may be expected in the hierarchy of input factors. One input factor that must assume greater importance is *assessment methods and formats.* While remaining a part of any course plan, they will also become more explicitly part of the quality assurance process. In fact, student assessment is the point where input, outcome and quality assurance most conspicuously converge. Quality assurance must include a scrutiny of how precisely and comprehensively students' achievement of intended learning outcomes is assessed. But also *the study plan as a whole* must receive increased attention – as a description of how the students' learning process is designed. To assess the level, coherence and progression of a programme in terms of the interrelationships between the qualifications framework, the specific learning aims, the descriptions of teaching/learning processes, the curriculum and the assessment methods will be a major task.

This means that quality assurance should renew its emphasis on didactic concerns. But a didactic orientation demands one further step. In order to go beyond a simple 'assurance' function, quality assurance must work from an *understanding* of how learning actually comes about. It must go beyond plans and designs and to the way in which the course design 'materialises' in learning situations and activities. In fact, one of the advantages of looking more critically at outcomes may be that more conscious efforts will be made to penetrate the 'black box' of the set learning situation, to analyse how what is going on there actually furthers student learning. If the 'knowledge' that is extracted from such analyses is going to be more than impressionistic, random and anecdotal, quality assurance will have to operate at a very detailed level, and to deal with concepts and phenomena that are hard to describe, assess and compare in exact terms.

Implications

If this is a challenge, it also means that quality assurance, by putting its focus here, may become more economical, shedding some of its tendencies to consider every aspect of circumstantial or infrastructural phenomena as equally important. By concentrating on the essentials of the learning process, quality assurance may become slimmer and less bureaucratic. Key performance indicators will still indicate and explain, but on the whole quality assurance processes may become more discursive, 'qualitative' and analytical, *reflecting the very qualitative nature of learning outcome.* But in gaining this, something else is necessarily lost: aspirations to pass exact judgements (beyond simple recognitions) must be lowered. If this does not happen, evaluation by learning outcome may easily lapse into a reductionist, perhaps even 'symbolist' mode of 'counting quality' by (supposedly) exact measurements.

A re-orientation along the lines sketched here will have (at least) two other important implications. One is that teaching academics will have to play more conspicuous roles in quality assurance. Discussing and evaluating educational quality is of course primarily an academic concern, not an administrative or political one. An approach that works along a *learning aims – process design – learning outcome* axis is by nature a didactic one and must involve the discipline community more than anyone else. This will provide a most needed corrective and supplement, filling an essential knowledge gap that system evaluations and students' course evaluations often leave open.

A third implication is that the relationship between programme and institutional, as well as between internal and external quality assurance should be reconsidered. A more didactic orientation demands that attention focuses on the local (programme) perspective. Only at this level can you increase the emphasis on the enhancement of *actual learning* and make quality work more concerned with quality development, learning strategies and learning styles, as related to learning aims. Does this imply that external quality assurance must now be of the 'programme' type? Of course this is one possible answer. But as always before, this is also a question of trust – and of cost/ benefit assessment: will comprehensive external programme evaluations yield results that justify the use of resources? Some would question that. The institutional approach indicates another kind of shift: to see the balance tilted more in favour of *internal* quality work, making this more integrated with the teaching/learning processes. In order to achieve this, the institution will require a 'decentralised' engagement with quality work, involving the academic staff as main players. But the institution will also need an institutional quality management system to steer and monitor this work properly, and to record and analyse it in a systematic and transparent way. In this case, the role of *external* QA may be reduced to a simple (if robust) mechanism for recognition/accreditation and an oversight function in relation to the institutions' internal quality work, preferably with a developmental perspective.

Possible follow-up questions:

- What should the documented 'evidence' of educational quality look like, if based on learning outcome?

- Is it a reasonable conclusion that quality assurance, when oriented towards learning outcome, must become more concerned with didactic issues (and possibly less with macro performance indicators)?

- Should external QA agencies operate with clearly different procedures when dealing with (a) accreditation/recognition and (b) learning efficiency-oriented evaluations respectively? (Since recognition is more concerned with inputs and capacities and can be more 'exact', whereas evaluations of actual learning outcome – and its relationship to inputs – deals with more 'extendable' phenomena.)

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II. Institutional reality in developing quality cultures

Quality culture in higher education: from theory to practice

By Dries Berings[1], Zjef Beerten[2], Veerle Hulpiau[3] and Piet Verhesschen[3]

Introduction

In order to stimulate academic research and reflection on the role of quality culture within Higher Education Institutions, further insight is needed into the concept itself and into its possible appearances In this paper an elaboration of the concept of quality culture is presented. First, the working definition of quality culture as has been formulated by the Flemish Bologna Expert Team is explained. Then, the dialectical model for quality culture put forward by Berings (2009) is presented. On the basis of this model an instrument was developed to explore quality culture in higher education settings. It was applied in a study in 14 university colleges ('hogescholen') and universities in Flanders (Berings, 2009). The opportunities and pitfalls of the application of this instrument as a tool for reflection on quality culture, are illustrated in two case studies. The first case is situated in a faculty of a university. The second case is based on a department of a university college.

Quality culture defined

A broad consensus exists in higher education about the importance of quality culture, among advocates of Total Quality Management (TQM) as well as among those who are rather sceptical about such a managerial approach to quality. The advocates of TQM emphasise that organisational culture has to be in line with the quality assurance processes and systems, so that they can reciprocally sustain each other. Sceptics argue, on the contrary, that quality culture makes top-down developed quality management largely superfluous. In other words they regard quality culture as a substitute for taut quality procedures and systems. Since the TMQ approach is not really embraced by most academics, linking the concept of quality culture in higher education automatically to the TQM paradigm is not obvious. The Flemish Bologna Expert Team has therefore chosen to formulate a working definition of quality culture that is not indissolubly connected to the TQM paradigm. This definition runs as follows: **quality culture is an *organisational culture* which contributes to the development of effective and efficient care for *quality*** and can be presented graphically as follows.

Figure 1. System and cultural approach to quality

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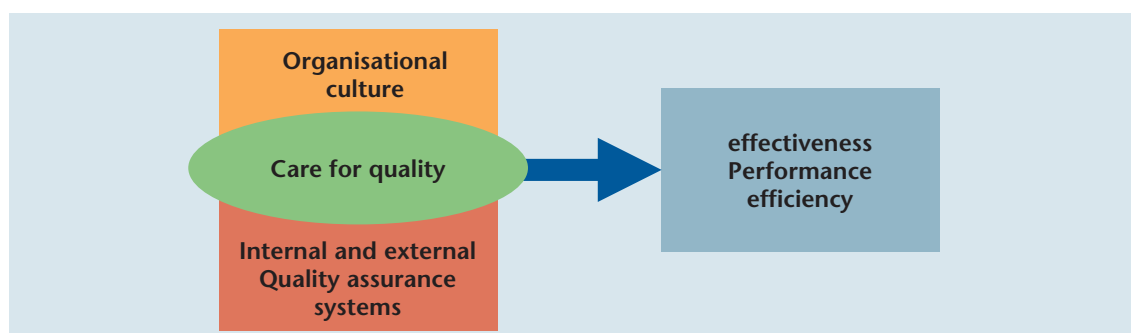
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By using the concept 'care for quality' and not 'quality management' or 'quality assurance' the Bologna experts, contrary to other scholars (Oakland, 1993; Viljoen & van Waveren, 2008), avoided an *a priori* linkage of quality culture either to the TQM paradigm, or to external Quality Assurance. Their definition leaves a sufficient degree of freedom for different approaches to quality in higher education (Helms *et al.,* 2001; Youssef *et al.,* 1998). Moreover, it can stimulate a fruitful debate about the relation between the system and cultural approach and the dialectic nature of quality culture in itself (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Such a dialectical approach is also the core principle of the conceptual framework put forward by Berings (2006; 2009) which is inspired by the work of Robert Quinn and his colleagues on competing values (Cameron, 1986; Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Quinn, 1988).

Conceptual framework

Thus, although a broad consensus exists about the importance of quality culture, there remains a lot of debate about the meaning and content of the concept, and the way it is related to educational and organisational outcomes. In order to clarify the role of quality culture Berings (2009) presented a conceptual framework for quality culture that encompasses divergent visions on the 'care for quality' in higher education. The two dimensional 'Competing Value Model' of Quinn (1988) was adapted by Berings (2001; 2006; 2009) so that it better reflects the cultural tension between 'managerialism' and 'professionalism', well known in higher education (Kolsaker, 2008). The difference between this latter model and the original model of Quinn lies in the number of bipolarities, namely three instead of two. Compared to the original Quinn model, the bipolarity 'collective versus individual orientation' is new. However the collectivism-individualism dimension is a classic dimension in culture models (Hofstede, 1998), as well as in models concerning universal and work values (Schwartz, 1992). The literature on professionalism in education also emphasises the tension between individual and collective orientation (e.g. Clement, 1995; Ostroff & Rothausen, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994). Moreover Berings (2001) concluded from earlier research that the 'collective orientation' dimension had the most predictive validity for student satisfaction as well as for employee satisfaction. These are sufficient reasons for paying attention to 'collective orientation' as a component of quality culture. But collective orientation is not the only field of attention in the model, which is composed of three bipolarities that can be interpreted as pairs of competing values as defined by Quinn (1988). Competing values are values that are both considered as valuable but are to a certain level incompatible or tricky to accomplish together.

Figure 2. Dialectical approach to quality culture
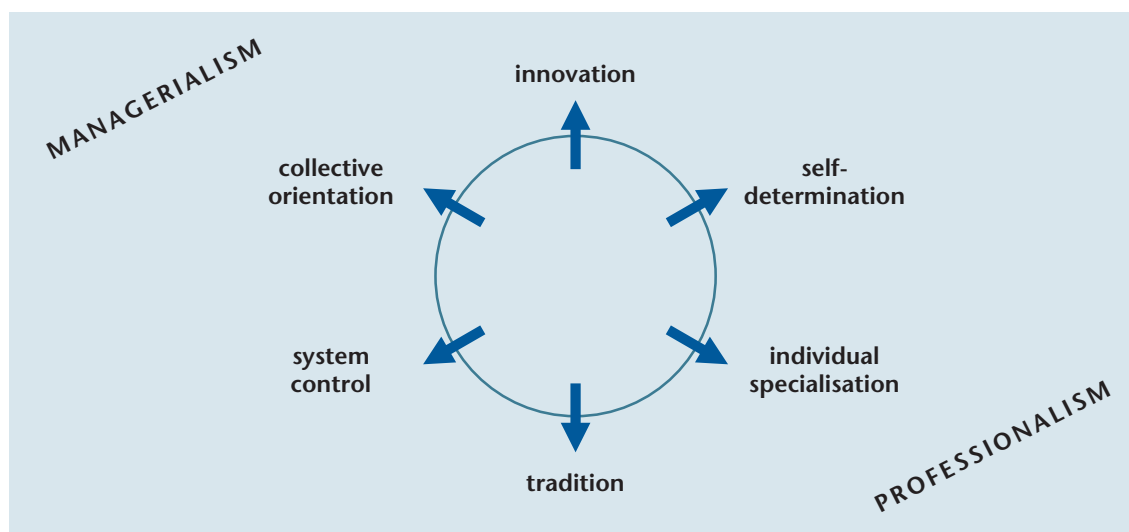
The resulting framework for reflection on quality culture is based on three pairs of competing values or bipolarities. Each bipolarity consists of a value associated with the TQM paradigm on the one hand and a value associated with the traditional academic world on the other hand. As a consequence each pair of opposite values can be considered as competing values. The challenge for higher education institutions and especially for their quality management systems is to find creative solutions for the three paradoxes in this model (Berings, 2006).

Before looking at the opposite value we go back to the two different visions on quality, on the one hand the TQM-paradigm characterised by 'managerialism' and on the other hand a more traditional vision of the academic world based on 'professionalism'. The core values within the managerial approach are: Innovation, Collective Orientation and System Control. In the opposite traditional academic view the values are: Tradition, Individual Specialisation and Self-Determination. The accent on these values, especially the last one, is in line with the idea that academics are reluctant to see the university as an enterprise, do not like to be managed and by consequence are critical towards TQM. This can be illustrated by a quote borrowed from the report on the three-round quality culture project of the European University Association: "It is often the case that when speaking of quality, it is easy to revert back to such managerial concepts as quality control, quality mechanisms, quality management, etc. These concepts, however, are not neutral. They convey a technocratic and top-down approach that will backfire in academic settings. The self-perception of academics as successful professionals who are committed to excellence means that they dislike being managed." (EUA, 2006, p. 6).

An instrument to explore quality culture

In order to make the competing value model of quality culture in higher education more useful for self-reflection, an instrument has been developed and tested in a pilot study conducted by Berings (2009). Six holistic descriptions of ideal typical cultural images corresponding to the six poles of the conceptual framework were adopted from the first study (Berings, 2001). These descriptions can be seen as 'images of organisation' in line with Gareth Morgan (1997) and in line with the idea of "ideal types" of Max Weber. Members of organisations can compare their own organisation with these images. Each of these six images of organisation Berings (2009) corresponds with one of the poles of the three dimensions in the model:

Image of organisation	Features
Innovation oriented	Proactive external adaptation and internal focus on continuous improvement
Tradition oriented	Conservative reflex and devotion to traditional values and practices
People oriented	Confidence in people and room for self-determination and creativity
System oriented	Coordination, standardisation and formalisation by plans, schedules and hierarchical structures
Professionally oriented	The competences of highly qualified and specialised autonomous professionals are the standardising principles; management and administration are supposed to be supportive rather than directing.
Collective oriented	Shared ideas and values, social problem solving and team work are taken for granted.

The six images or "mirrors" are used to give organisation members the opportunity to express their preference or aversion towards each image. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the instrument five cultural features were added for each of the six cultural images. For each of these six images as well as for the 30 complementary items, two questions are asked: a) to what degree would you find this organisation attractive to work in? b) to what degree does your organisation resemble this organisation? Thus this instrument assesses the *cultural preference* as well as the *cultural perception.* The gap between preference and perception reflects the amount of organisational *change readiness.* The results of the survey are summarised in an organisational culture profile that shows the preference, the perception and the readiness for change.

The pilot study of 2009 revealed the following overall cultural profile for the 28 (sub)organisations (two diagnoses for each university college/university participating). In general the highest perception score is found for the people and innovation-oriented image. The preference is highest for the collective-oriented

organisation but the attractiveness of the people, innovation and system oriented organisation is also above the midpoint of the scale. From the comparison of the perception with the preference, we can conclude that the readiness to change is highest with respect to the collective oriented image.

Figure 3. Global cultural profile
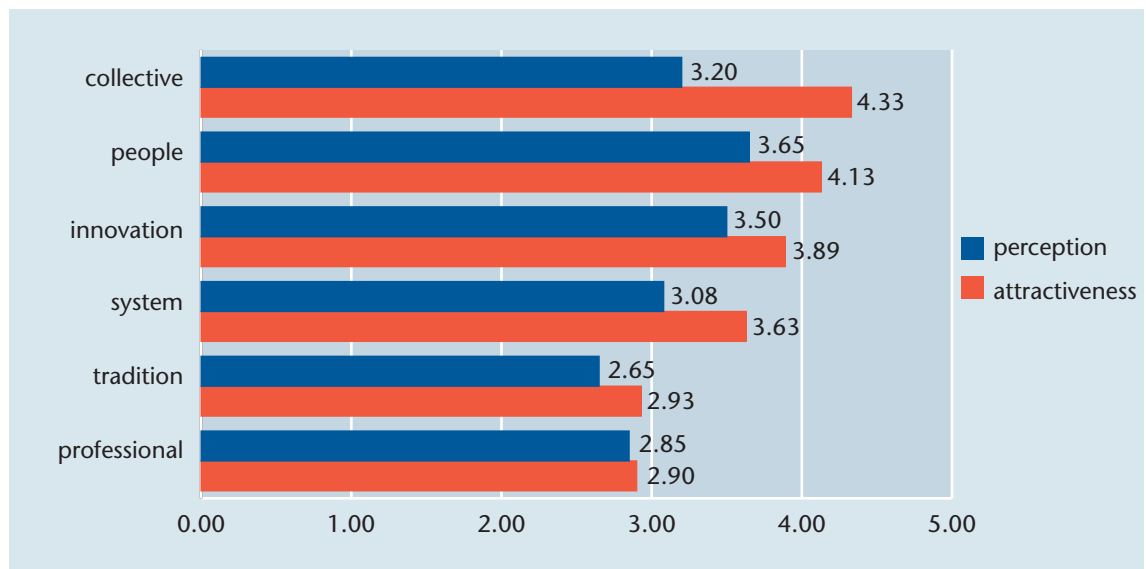
The same study revealed that employees of universities put the same weight on the collective orientation as employees of university colleges while for other images we see typical differences between the two corresponding with the 'managerial' versus 'professional' orientation in the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 2). Innovation and system orientation is more accentuated in university colleges, while tradition and individual professionalism and specialisation is more accentuated in universities.

Figure 4. Cultural preference in universities versus university colleges ('hogescholen')
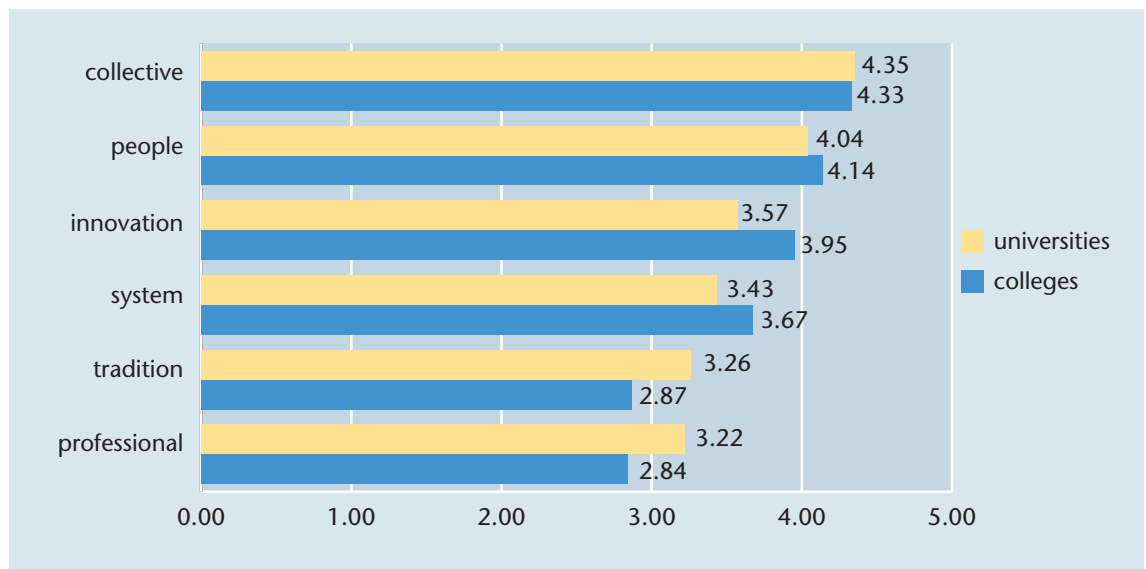
Two cases

As the illustration shows, the cultural profile that emerges after surveying employees differs from organisation to organisation (Berings, 2008). We will now present two case studies, one of a university and one of a university college. After giving a short identification of the department, we will describe how the care for quality is sustained on the one hand by internal and external quality assurance systems and tools, and on the other hand by the organisational culture as it emerges from the survey. The evaluation

of the appropriateness of the system and cultural characteristics of their care for quality logically depends on the primordial performance criteria of the departments. Therefore, we also present for each case these performance criteria and how they are monitored within the department. We will finish with an evaluation of the perceived congruence, fit or misfit between the system and cultural features of the care for quality, and the postulated educational and organisational objectives and correspondent performance criteria.

Case 1

The results of the survey in a university programme in the faculty of sciences are described as a first case. Although the initial instrument was developed within the TQM-framework, the university was interested in participation because the framework of competing values allowed for the use of the instrument without reference to the TQM paradigm, considered by most academics as too business-linked and therefore not *a priori* appropriate to an academic context. The link to the competing values framework enables the instrument to be used in a non-normative, non-prescriptive way. Such an approach is in line with the bottom-up approach in organisational development that this faculty prefers. In this way the results allow those responsible for the programme and their colleagues to judge whether the perceived quality culture corresponds to the values that are considered necessary to attain the programme objectives with regard to quality. The major findings are described in the table below. A feedback session between those responsible and the researcher revealed that the resulting profiles were recognisable and had been a trigger for interesting discussions within the faculty. On the basis of this positive evaluation the university decided to participate with more faculties in the second phase of the project, which aimed at further improvement of the instrument and the development of a coaching methodology.

Identification	• A programme in a faculty in the Science and Technology group
	• University with 13 faculties, (63 bachelor programmes, 121 master programmes and 57 advanced master programmes)
	• Academic degrees
	• Academic staff involved in education and training, research and service to society
Quality system (external)	• External peer review at the programme level (by site visits), followed by accreditation.
	• The process of external peer review is coordinated by the Flemish Interuniversity Council, particularly the quality assurance agency within this organisation.
	• Self evaluation of the programme results in a report that serves as basis for the external peer review committee. After having conducted a site visit the external committee reports on its conclusions.
	• Procedures and evaluation criteria are determined in a protocol that has been approved by the Flemish Interuniversity Council, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders, and the Flemish government.
	• The report of the external visiting committee serves as the basis for the decision concerning the accreditation of the programme. The accreditation is granted by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders. The accreditation of the programme grants the HEI the right to offer the programme, to deliver diplomas and to receive government funding (the latter excepted for the advanced master programmes).

Quality system (internal)	• The internal quality system is based on the concept of the quality cycle, the overall educational concept of the university and the educational framework of each individual programme. No explicit reference is made to well known managerialist paradigms (like EFQM, ISO, CIPO …). • The fundamentals of the quality system consist of the clear articulation of goals and objectives at organisational level as well as at programme level, the attention paid to providing support of all kinds in implementing and realising the objectives, regular quality evaluation, and clear procedures and support with regard to the follow-up of evaluation activities. • The internal quality system aims at reconciling a top-down with a bottom-up approach, centralised with decentralised initiatives, initiatives aiming at accountability and at quality improvement. • Each programme has its own programme committee, responsible for the quality of the programme. In addition, this faculty has a special group, focused on the translation and implementation of the educational concept of the university and of university-wide guidelines for the faculty, adding specific objectives.
Performance criteria	• Outcomes monitored: study success, student satisfaction, employee satisfaction, employment statistics, scientific output, market share etc.
Quality culture	• For each value except for specialisation the preference is larger than the perception and so there is readiness for change. The biggest gap and therefore the biggest readiness for change can be seen for the value of collectiveness. Whereas the perception is 2.44, the wish amounts to 4.56. There is also a bigger wish for focus on people (4.44) than is actually perceived (3.56). There is slightly more professionalism and focus on specialisation (3.44) than wished for (3.22). There is room for more system approach (perception: 2.22; preference: 3.11). It is striking that at the same time there is a wish for more innovation and for more tradition, although the wish for innovation is the strongest. • When one looks at the culture features, the perception is that there is plenty of room for specialisation and room for individual creativity. The faculty tries to attract top specialists, has much trust in the staff who have the freedom to plan their own working plans. There is a preference for collaboration (4.11) but this does not mean that much time should be devoted to the elaboration of a shared vision (3.00).

Case 1: Quality Culture Diagnosis

Radar	
Scores	
most perceived features	1. Staff members are allowed to choose their working methods themselves (3.89) 2. Staff members have the opportunity to specialise in the domain they are good in (3.89) 3. The staff members feel they receive a lot of room for personal creativity (3.67)
least perceived features	1. Every minute is used efficiently (2.33) 2. Time and effort were allocated to develop a common vision (2.44) 3. Important arrangements are committed to paper (2.44)
most preferred features	1. The organisation has an eye for the person behind the employee (4.22) 2. Management trusts its staff members completely (4.22) 3. The staff members feel they receive a lot of room for personal creativity (4.22) 4. The team regularly discusses the best way to work (4.22) 5. Staff members have the opportunity to specialise in the domain they are good in (4.22)
least preferred features	1. Procedures with which staff members are familiar, remain unchanged for a considerable period of time (2.33) 2. Staff members with a long employment record are held in high esteem and enjoy authority in the organisation (2.33) 3. It rapidly responds to new trends in society (2.78)

Case 2

In the second case we describe the quality assurance approach of a professionally-oriented bachelor programme and compare it with the results of the cultural screening from a competing value perspective.

Case 2: Care for quality

Identification	The second case applies to the Department of Health & Welfare (students ± 700 & staff± 80) within the Limburg Catholic University College (LCUC).
	The major mission of the department is education, with a bachelor programme in socio-educational care work.
	• 34% of the employed alumni work with mentally impaired people,
	• 23% work in welfare with children and adults,
	• 13% work in mental healthcare, and
	• 10% work with physically impaired people.
	Over the last few years, applied research has developed into a growing asset. Since all the researchers are partly engaged in the educational programmes as lecturers, there is a strong convergence between education and research.
Quality system (external)	See case 1: Quality system (external). Different to case 1, in that the process of external peer review is coordinated by the Council of Flemish University Colleges.
Quality system (internal)	The HEI uses the EFQM-model as the backbone of its quality assurance. This is sustained by the quality manual embedded in the intranet system. The EFQM-model is used for accountability and as well for improvement over a 4-year cycle.
	Quality is managed and monitored through an extensive Multiyear Education Development Plan (2008-2013) that focuses on issues like the educational programme, students, staff, research and employability, internationalisation and organisational development.
	Within this 'master plan' a department formulates its own Action Plans each year.
	Goals are monitored by the head of the department and the departmental quality assurance officer. Once a year the progress of this Multiyear Education Development Plan is followed up by the LCUC Quality Department in close coordination with the educational staff of the LCUC. When necessary goals are adjusted or resources are (re) allocated.
Performance criteria	Outcomes like study success, student satisfaction, employee satisfaction, employment statistics, scientific output, market share etc. are monitored on a regular basis.
	Performance criteria are defined for outcomes like study success; student drop-out numbers; student satisfaction in regard to academic staff, to the educational programme, to social services, and to catering; student and staff international mobility; alumni satisfaction as regards the educational programme; alumni employment and staff satisfaction with management.

Quality culture	When we look at the profile, we can see a strong convergence around three poles: *Innovation, People and Tradition,* with the People-image having the highest scores in perception. Respondents prefer, however, a more collective- and system-oriented department and a less professionally-oriented one. Here it is the collective-image that ranks highest in preference. As mentioned above, the *People-oriented* pole showed the highest value in the pilot study with the quality culture instrument. The perception (3.56) of the respondents on this feature almost reflects their preference (3.44). The management shows confidence in their staff and leaves a lot of room for self-determination and creativity. But this fostered 'culture of freedom' may have the side effect that people experience a lack of coordination. The culture profile shows an implicit need for a well-considered management system and organisation This is confirmed by the scores on the *System-oriented* pole where the preference (3.33) substantially exceeds the perception (2.56). A survey (in Spring 2009) on the transparency of departmental organisation, in which a majority of the staff participated, revealed a lack of knowledge about the organisation and its management. As a result, the organisation and its hierarchical structure were reviewed and made more transparent. In addition to this, departmental procedures were reviewed, more standardised and formalised in view of an external assessment in March 2010. In this way, the system-oriented pole was adjusted. The above-mentioned accent on individual creativity is complementary to the accent put on *Innovation*, where – again – perception (3.22) almost equals preference (3.33). Small groups and individuals take a lot of initiatives like introducing work-based learning, developing new ways of assessment, strengthening international internship etc. The tendency toward innovation is not extreme, and is partially complemented by a modest care for *Tradition* with respectively a score of 2.78 and 2.89 for perception and preference. The largest gap between perception (2.89) and preference (4.22) is found for the *Collective-oriented* pole. The lack of collectivism can be attributed to the strong growth and renewal of academic staff and its third task activities like societal services and community development. Furthermore, there is a great need for shared ideas and values, for a more common feeling and for team work beyond the commendable innovative work of individuals and small groups. In the last year several staff meetings were held to prepare for the external audit. After this audit took place new discussions were held and ideas were developed on new perspectives for the future. In spite of the enhanced staff specialisation, there remains a clear preference for the collective orientation that is considered more as an alternative than a complement for an organisational culture characterised by individual specialisation, performance and competition. This is reflected by the scores on the pole *Professionally-oriented.*

Case 2: Quality Culture Diagnosis

Radar	
	A: innovation D: collective — B: people C: system — F: professional E: tradition perception / preference

Scores	
	B: people — 3.56 / 3.44 A: innovation — 3.22 / 3.33 D: collective — 2.89 / 4.22 E: tradition — 2.78 / 2.89 C: system — 2.56 / 3.33 F: professional — 2.33 / 1.89 perception / preference

most perceived features	1. Management trusts its staff members completely (3.78)
	2. Staff members are allowed to choose their working methods themselves (3.67)
	3. Each staff member's individual qualities and limitations are taken into account (3.67)
	4. Staff members are allowed to concentrate on the tasks they are good at (3.67)

least perceived features	1. A lot of effort is made to attract top specialists (2.44)
	2. Every minute is used efficiently (2.67)
	3. Things that have proven to work well remain unchanged (2.67)
	4. The organisation tries to be one step ahead of other organisations with respect to innovation (2.67)

most preferred features	1. The organisation has an eye for the person behind the employee (4.11)
	2. Colleagues get ample time to learn from each other and exchange experiences (4.11)
	3. Management trusts its staff members completely (4.00)
	4. The team regularly discusses the best way to work (4.00)
	5. Time and effort are allocated to develop a common vision (4.00)

least preferred features	1. Procedures with which staff members are familiar, remain unchanged for a considerable period of time (2.33)
	2. Staff members with a long employment record are held in high esteem and enjoy authority in the organisation (2.44)
	3. Staff members lose as little time as possible with tasks that are not part of their specialisation (2.67)
	4. The organisation tries to be one step ahead of other organisations with respect to innovation (2.67)

Discussion

We can conclude that a dialectical approach to quality culture can be fruitful when it is based on a robust and recognisable conceptual framework completed by an assessment and reflection tool. Such a tool can help higher education institutions and their divisions to reflect on their organisational culture. The dialectical approach that is not *a priori* connected to prescriptive management-oriented quality control models enables an open debate concerning quality culture and how it can sustain the care for quality. It can be a starting point from which a better fit can be developed between quality culture and quality systems in order to maximise the achievement of the educational and organisational goals.

The Flanders Bologna Expert Group has therefore started a new project on quality culture in order to validate the assessment and reflection instrument through a larger sample and to develop a more elaborated method for the follow up of the results of the survey. The follow-up tool will consist of three parts: first, a step-by-step procedure to interpret the survey results and translate them into concrete actions. Second, best practices will be gathered for each of the poles of the model. In respect to the dialectical principle, in each description of a best practice attention will be paid to the possible 'collateral damage' that such an initiative could have on the opposite pole in the model. Third, social-cognitive exercises will be developed that stimulate teams to reflect on their qualities, weaknesses and challenges concerning quality culture. This method is inspired by the core quadrant method developed by Ofman (2006) in order to stimulate managers to reflect on their own qualities and weaknesses.

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No short cuts in Quality Assurance – Theses from a sense-making perspective

By Oliver Vettori and Manfred Lueger[1]

This paper argues that one of the key problems in designing/implementing an institutional quality assurance (QA) system is rooted in the underlying assumption that rationally functioning organisations can be rationally managed and controlled. What is often neglected is the dynamic and self-referential character of organisational developments and the interpretive autonomy of the actors involved. Emanating from ideas of Karl Weick and similar organisation theorists and based on the authors' practical experiences with developing an institutional quality culture over a period of six years, the paper puts three alternative theses for discussion: that learning from others has its limits; that a successful QA system is not built for the organisation, but *from* the organisation; and that it is not enough to 'involve' stakeholders or 'let them participate': if teachers, students etc. are to see themselves as a part of a certain quality culture they have to be assisted in their sense-making efforts.

Introduction

Quality Assurance may no longer be a "challenged" issue, but as a concept it is still facing some considerable challenges: the active involvement of key stakeholders (in a way that they actually feel involved, cf. ESU, 2010), the avoidance of pure top-down approaches (e.g. EUA, 2006) and the establishment of holistic institutional systems are only some of the items regularly discussed on the 'To Do'-list of the QA profession. And indeed, the practical realisation of these ideas seems to suffer from some inherent contradictions: Stensaker (2008: 6), for example, states that "although staff involvement is, in principle, encouraged, what is often meant is involvement that supports the external agenda and not the perceived problems of those working in the institutions". Waugh (1998) suggests that any kind of strategic planning is essentially a top-down process where many members of the organisation and its broader community can be involved in the process, but the leadership is responsible for defining the parameters of the discussion; yet involvement does not equal engagement. And Houston *et al.* (2008: 222) found in their research that while there was broad agreement among the key actors that quality was a concern, "there was little agreement about what exactly the issues are or how they should be resolved".

The resulting and growing need for practical orientation seems to be met with an equally growing number of quality assurance guidelines, benchmarking initiatives and best practice exchanges which suggest a linear learning process, where ideas and models can be imitated or imported from successful pioneers and the experiences of others help to avoid costly mistakes. Nevertheless, such efforts seldom work as intended, with key stakeholders still feeling left out, considering the formal QA system a threat to their own well-established quality culture and with QA routines becoming a merely bureaucratic shadow of their idealistic original design.

From our perspective, one of the reasons for such problems is rooted in the underlying assumptions that rationally functioning organisations can be equally rationally managed and controlled. What is often neglected in the relevant quality assurance discourse is the dynamic and self-referential character of organisational developments and the interpretive autonomy of the actors involved. In our own case, for example, neither the establishment of a QA Board that involved all internal actor groups nor the introduction of a wide-spread network of academic quality promoters were able to ensure that most members of the university a) were aware of the most recent QA initiatives and b) would interpret those initiatives in the supposedly benevolent and improvement-oriented way they were intended to be. It was only through a continuous (and mostly informal) exchange and dialogue with various university members that the awareness level was raised – and a lot of the original initiatives could either be changed for the better or jointly repositioned (not every project has to be sold as a major improvement for *all* parties). In this paper

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we will thus try to take a different perspective to such experiences by reinterpreting some of the difficulties described above as a problem of organisational sense-making. Starting with a brief survey of the ideas of Karl Weick and similar organisation theorists we will then present three theses on potential 'developmental blockers' that are in equal parts derived from our theoretical considerations and our practical experiences in developing an institutional quality culture over a period of six years.

The dynamics of organisational sense-making

Despite an observable tendency of international higher education institutions towards Taylorism (Parker, 2007) due to a mechanistic understanding of organisations (cf. Morgan, 1986), quality assurance systems do not work like machines, where solutions to problems are created in an automated way, but can rather be compared to von Foerster's 'non-trivial' machines (Foerster, 1984): quality assurance systems are complex and dynamic social entities, whose structures are partly "intransparent" (e.g. patterns of actions in actual teaching-learning-interactions), and in which different actors (university managers, teachers, students, administrators etc.) pursue different interests. In his works, Newton (2007, 2002, 2000) has frequently pointed out that quality cannot be conceived through formal definitions alone, yet "is also crucially contingent on how it is used and experienced in practice, by academics and others who are impacted upon by quality assurance arrangements" (Newton, 2007: 16). In this regard, "the process of development and implementation quality policy becomes changed, even subverted" (*ibid.* p. 20). As one consequence, processes permanently deviate from the original plans and intentions and blaze their own trails (cf., among others, Weick, 1979; Dörner, 1991; Luhmann, 2000; and Ortmann, 2003, 2004).

This dynamics can be related to several factors:

a) Organisations rely on communication, yet not as a mechanism for transmitting information as in the Shannon-Weaver-Model (1949) but as a process for generating and sharing meaning. In this respect, the chosen information is not simply transferred and reaches the recipients as intended, but has to be actively reconstructed by the communication's participants. Due to the plurivalency of language and action, this requires an active interpretive act on behalf of the actors, where those who want to convey an information depend on the others' reactions in order to realise what kind of sense they are making of the information. This is mirrored in Weick's observation "How can I know what I think, until I see what I say?" (1979: 207). From this perspective, communication is a process where change is inherent, including the change of meaning(s) in daily interactions. Controlling and managing how a (communicative) act – such as a new QA guideline – is received and perceived becomes almost impossible.

b) Following the premises of Symbolic Interactionism, actors interact with each other (and towards other entities) on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to them. These meanings emerge from social interactions and are handled by and modified through dynamic interpretative processes (cf. Blumer, 1969). On the other hand, any interpretation of a current situation is based on a retrospective assessment of previous experiences and is not just an individual achievement, but rather embedded in collective processes of negotiation. The introduction of a new evaluation routine, for example, cannot be detached from the actors' sense-making patterns that were established and structured by the handling of previous evaluations (or similar processes). It certainly stands to reason that the resulting perspectives are not homogeneous, but can differ with regard to an actor's role, position, experiences and expectations. Though we tend to neglect it in the more abstract professional discourse, the establishment of an information system as foreseen in the ENQA Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2009) holds different meanings and functions for university managers than it does for students, teachers, administrators or future employers. This not only manifests itself in different ideas on how such a system should be designed, but also how the data are used or what attributions are made to the system as such – ranging from a helpful tool to a symbol of dominance and control. On the discourse level, a dismissive or even more negative reaction towards new QA elements can therefore be discarded as irrational – yet on the practical level it is still a valid and relevant reality to be dealt with.

c) Actions (and decisions) in everyday life are seldom isolated, but rather integrated in more complex (inter)action sequences. Particularly in cooperative organisational settings, the consequences of actions and decisions are often intertwined with the actions and decisions of others (cf. Weick's concept of

'mutual equivalence structures', Weick, 1979). As a consequence, actors rarely have control over the effects of their actions. This can result in the emergence of action patterns which are largely uncoupled from the actors' intentions. A teaching award intended for encouraging innovative course designs, for example, can in the medium-term well have the opposite effect by inducing teachers to adapt their designs to the established (and thus standardising) award criteria. Controlling a developmental process in advance (something that is not far from the suggestions of most QA model cookbooks), becomes an almost impossible endeavour: it is rather in retrospect that most actions reveal their intended and un-intended effects and start to make sense – an observation that gets far too little attention in most projects and implementation processes.

Three theses from a sense-making perspective

Summing up, a QA system that is designed on the assumption that strategies and procedures can be rationally and linearly planned and implemented might soon face considerable difficulties, as the actions within an institution do not necessarily follow the system's rationale but are rather defined and oriented within a situation with a variety of sense-making patterns that may well differ from those of the system's architects. We therefore propose a change of perspective that may challenge a few of our fonder assumptions about how QA systems should be developed and implemented. Based on the theoretical ideas introduced in the first part and our own experiences from developing an institutional quality culture over the past six years, we will formulate three theses of how this sense-making approach can be put into practice. It is notable though that the theses can only be roughly sketched in the scope of this paper. Consequently, they should not be read as instructions or guidelines, but as an opportunity to put our current strategies into question and maybe come up with suitable alternatives.

Thesis one: There can be no short-cuts in Quality Assurance – learning from others has its limits.

We do not believe that the troubles of implementing certain QA procedures necessarily begin with the implementation process itself but that they can often be related to another preceding assumption: that we can rationally learn from the experiences of others and that what has worked elsewhere will also work in our own institution. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have suggested that such mimetic isomorphism results from standard responses to uncertainty and that "organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 152). And indeed, evidence suggests that the field of higher education is no exception here (e.g. Stensaker & Norgard, 2001).

However, importing successful models can have severe drawbacks. Stripped of their immediate developmental contexts and specific institutional conditions, they create and carry different meanings to those in the quality culture they originally emerged from. As our own experience shows, academic quality promoters, for example, can be of valuable support for focussing activities and initiating new projects in academic units with a high level of enthusiasm for teaching, or in search of new communications structures. Transferred into (and externally imposed onto) other units with different conditions, the same concept can be met with great reluctance or even hostility, with the promoters being seen as adding to the bureaucracy or as the management's extended arm. Observations in the field suggest that even EUA's quality culture concept is experiencing a departure from its original normative ideal in the context of its dissemination process, marking a shift of the quality culture notion towards a more functionalist meaning where quality culture is about the development of, and compliance with, processes of internal quality assurance (Harvey, 2009). Small wonder, then, that the term *quality assurance culture* is already surfacing (European Commission, 2009).

In our view such limits in transferring a successful idea or model are closely related to the limits of imitative learning as it disregards the historical dimension of any institutional quality culture (cf. Vettori *et al.,* 2007) – and the re-interpretation of new ideas against the background of this culture. If we take this seriously, that would rather call for a policy of small steps than jumping over whole developmental stages.

Thesis two: A successful QA system is not built *for* the organisation, but *from* the organisation.

Although it seems widely agreed that a QA system is never built from scratch, the usual implementation process is a linear one: new tools and procedures are developed and the organisation has to adapt to them. And usually the organisation *does* adapt, though not always as intended: experiences with one of the most popular and wide-spread tools, student evaluations of teaching, show that improved results do not necessarily equal 'better' teaching or learning and that the long-term effects can even be counterproductive (e.g. Hundt, 2000; Taut & Brauns, 2003; Frey, 2007; Lueger, 2011). This is not to say that evaluations cannot be valuable instruments for various purposes, on the contrary; yet the way they are working may not always fit with the original design idea.

We are therefore proposing a different take on the implementation of QA procedures and standards: instead of translating external standards to internal processes and procedures (assuming that all organisational actors will understand their rationality in the same way), it might be more fruitful to explore practices and activities that are already successfully applied within the institution and translate them into the more formal and standardised language of the QA profession, i.e. 'making sense of them' within different interpretive frames. Most HEIs, for example, have a number of different feedback forms for students at their disposal (e.g. focus groups, sounding boards, fast feedback variants) which can be of equal value as standardised questionnaires (presuming that the main purpose of such instruments is not the production of comparable numbers). And the alumni networks of different university departments will often provide more informative insights into the graduates' post-university experiences than a quantitative alumni survey (though almost no one would count them among the official QA repertoire). To put it into perspective: it is not our intention to discard the value of additional surveys, questionnaires, process analyses (which fulfil several important functions), but to advocate a different starting point by taking stock of those practices that already carry meaning (or make sense) for the actors in the organisation and carefully develop them and adapt them to necessary external requirements. In our view, such an approach would even be compatible with convergence projects such as the European Standards and Guidelines – as long as they are not taken as a literal checklist for assessing whether all solutions look the same.

Thesis three: It is not enough to 'involve' stakeholders or 'let them participate'– if they are to see themselves as a part of a certain quality culture they have to be assisted in their sense-making.

Involving different stakeholders is one of the key requirements of any QA system. Yet in many cases the modes of involvement follow a similar pattern where a few stakeholder representatives are appointed to formal bodies and committees and the rest are cordially invited (or obliged) to participate in various activities, mostly in providing evaluation data or other documentation. The activities themselves are usually elsewhere defined. It is thus not very surprising that these stakeholders feel little inclined to claim ownership for the QA framework – or even perceive it as such. In our own university we were initially rather astounded to find that even after a number of years from the establishment of the first QA framework, our students were neither aware of its existence nor did they show much trust in the university's efforts –despite the fact that they were (at least in theory) involved in various ways. After a while we realised that even after participating in an evaluation, focus group or programme development project, most students still did not interpret that as a quality-related activity, partly because they knew too little about the context and the underlying processes and partly because they had a completely different idea of what quality assurance would and should be.

It is our persuasion that these different perceptions and sense-making patterns are not necessarily a problem but they do have to be taken into consideration. If different actors are to be regarded (and regard themselves) as an active part of an institutional quality culture, they need to be enabled (structurally and interpretively) to develop their own initiatives. From such a perspective, the QA framework itself does not need to define and regulate every specific procedure but it must assist the various actors in their sense-making. Following Weick, potentially any framework can be successful as long as it fulfils the following functions: "1. Gets people into action; 2. Gives people a direction (through values or whatever); 3. Supplies legitimate explanations that are energizing and enable actions to be repeated" (Weick, 2000: 163). Here, concepts or guidelines are not regarded as normative parameters but as a means for supporting the actors' learning process.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to analyse some of the more common issues and difficulties in designing and implementing a QA system from a sense-making perspective. Following some concepts of modern organisation theory we have proposed that some of these difficulties might be grounded in a general rationalisation of organisational processes and actions, irrespective of the fact that they are usually interpreted in various ways. In this respect, it might be necessary to reflect critically on some of our underlying assumptions of how QA systems should be developed and what role different actors might/could play in such endeavours – always aware of the fact that the emergence of meaning(s) within an organisation cannot be controlled at the outset but will only be visible with the benefit of hindsight. Or to conclude with the words of Karl Weick himself (2000: 158): "People use labels to organize and make sense retrospectively of what they have been doing. They use labels to demonstrate accountability and acceptable practice to others. To portray quality as a problem to be managed can, if taken seriously, set in motion the very forces that preclude its realization."

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Can we make the bureaucracy of monitoring the quality of a university's learning and teaching more acceptable?

By Kath Hodgson[1]

Universities and other institutions of higher education have always been concerned about the quality of their work - whether in research or in teaching their students – and have been anxious to ensure that the quality is as high as possible. In the UK, when the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 established Higher Education Funding Councils with responsibility for securing "that provision is made for assessing the quality of education" provided in universities, considerable activity was triggered nationally in the field of 'quality'. This activity included, for example, institutional audits and subject reviews introduced by a central body, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which was established to be responsible for monitoring 'quality'. Ultimately, they also developed the 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education'. Quality gained further prominence through the development of the 'Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European HE Area' and the need for institutions to benchmark local developments against not only national but European frameworks. In the UK, prominence of the National Student Survey and the introduction of student fees raised the profile yet further by increasing public and political interest in the quality of the provision provided by institutions.

Two of the main criticisms of the more explicit quality assurance processes introduced as a result of these developments were, first, a perception of increased unnecessary bureaucracy and secondly, the introduction of a new breed of university administrators 'the quality officers'. In this paper it is argued that both developments were steps in the evolution of the effective assurance of the quality of the student learning experience but it needed to become something which was a routine part of the academic work of an institution and key to ensuring systematic enhancement.

Since the introduction of the national and European quality frameworks referred to above, and external interest in institutions' quality assurance, much of what has been written by the academic community has been critical. From the beginning, it was seen by many academics as bureaucracy devised by quality officers involving the collection of data and general checking largely for its own sake. The introduction of many quality assurance procedures was seen as taking up valuable time that would be better spent on work with students or in doing research. Writing in January 2005, Alison Wolf, a professor of management at King's College, London, made clear her frustration at having to spend a day on forms designed to satisfy the QAA.

> Given the consensus that most QAA demands are a waste of space and the supposed move to a "lighter touch" regime, you might expect a decline in meaningless form-filling. On the contrary. In every institution I know, it continues apace: a defensive exercise in providing, on paper, every assurance and statistic and policy declaration that could possibly be imagined.[2]

Such criticism was not limited to the UK. The European University Association's survey of a sample of higher education institutions in 29 countries in 2004/5 (Reichert & Tauch, 2005) showed that, in many of them, external quality assurance tended to be seen as a bureaucratic burden of only limited use for development.

A major criticism of the quality assurance arrangements introduced in many institutions was that the emphasis was simply on getting good results by whatever means. It was argued that part of the problem was the emphasis on the simple measurable performance indicators, such as data which fed into determining the positions in league tables. This often became referred to as 'bean counting' and encouraged institutions to manipulate data to meet targets (Harvey, 2002). Hence, while the main purpose of monitoring quality and performance should be to act as a catalyst for enhancement of the student experience, this was not always what was seen to be happening in practice. What we began to see was improvement in quality

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[2] Wolf, 2005 : 13.

assurance processes and in those activities where performance could be measured against simple targets rather than improvement and enhancement of actual learning and teaching.

There is little point in denying, or ignoring, the criticisms like those outlined above. It must be accepted that many academic staff in universities were and remain suspicious of anything associated with the monitoring of 'quality' which they perceive as having little to do with improving the standard of the university's work. The monitoring of the quality of a university's learning and teaching has to be more inextricably linked in practice with the continual work of enhancing that learning and teaching.

If we are to improve the situation the starting point must be within an institution – with an institution's own structures and procedures for maintaining confidence in the quality of its work. The European University Association's survey, referred to above, points to the importance of a "well developed internal quality culture" (Reichert & Tauch, 2005: 30). However, such internal procedures must recognise the existence of the external context and incorporate it, using the information it provides.

Another common criticism relates to the posts associated with 'quality' created in universities since the early 1990s. Academics' suspicion of 'quality' can extend to suspicion of the motives of people involved in quality assurance, even those quality officers within their own institution. The posts associated with quality assurance were often filled by people who did not see themselves as part of the academic community but as part of 'the management'. Their main concern was with external monitoring in order to get good results. To this end they concentrated on accountability and the procedures for monitoring, but in so doing, it is argued, "they forfeit the prospect of engaging in innovative or quality enhancement-orientated work". (Newton, 2002: 47). This again was not inevitable (Hodgson & Whalley, 2006: 509) and a case study to show how a change was effected is given below.

A case study of a development in one institution to reduce perceived bureaucracy and improve partnership working

For many years the University of Leeds undertook a range of separate and distinct activities all intended to assure the quality of its provision. Separate procedures which were of particular relevance to this case study were:

i)   consideration of student feedback from internal surveys
ii) consideration of data from the National Student Survey
iii) consideration of statistics on student performance
iv) feedback from external examiners
v)   module and programme review
vi) the procedures for the amendment of modules
vii) operation of staff student committees.

Each activity had been introduced by the institutional quality officers in response to the need to meet a particular external requirement and individually each was in accordance with national and European frameworks. The procedures were regarded as being owned by the quality officers and as imposed on the academic community. As each procedure developed and evolved locally there was increasing overlap between them.

In 2007 a new Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning & Teaching (PVC) was appointed who worked with the senior quality officer to stress the importance of true partnership between academic and professional staff and led from the front on effecting a cultural change which allowed the strengths of different participants to be used in a collaborative way. One example of this in practice was discussion involving the quality officers and the academic community on the quality assurance procedures and consideration as to whether they remained appropriate.

In assessing the effectiveness of the arrangements, the need for effective quality assurance was not questioned but the following particular concerns about the particular processes adopted were identified:
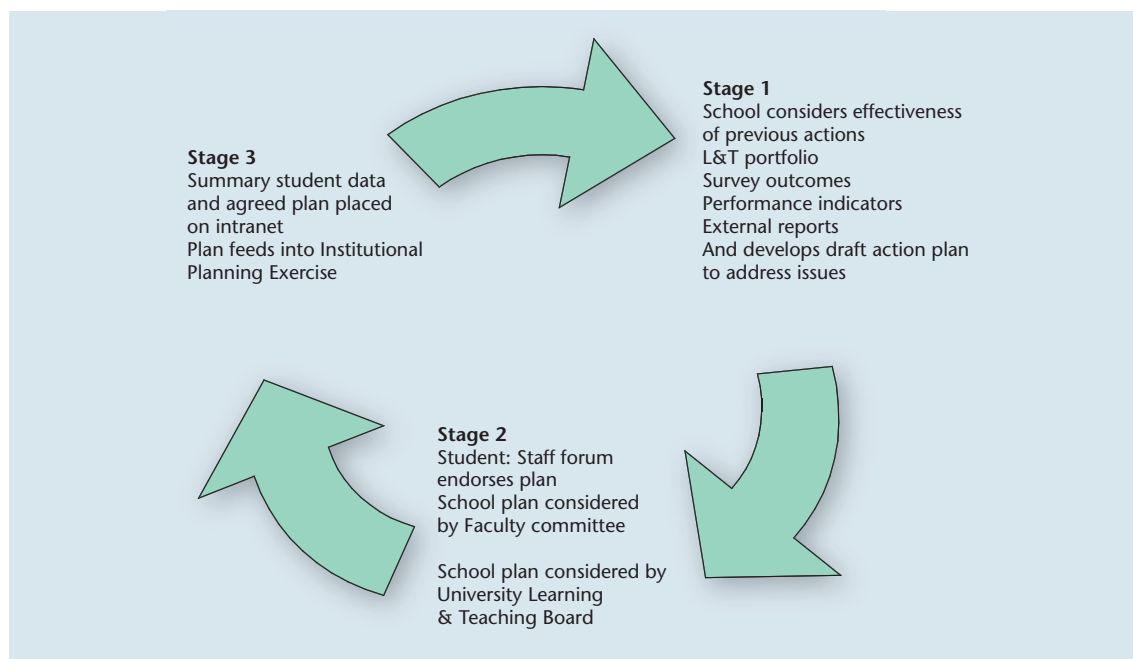
- The local differences in the processes meant that the institution was finding it increasingly difficult to be confident of the quality of provision in all of its 28 Schools.
- There was a need to look more holistically at the student experience, involving curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Although completing surveys and having places on all committees, students were increasingly becoming disengaged from the real activity to enhance their experience.
- The processes encouraged superficiality in considering student feedback with little discussion with students on underlying concerns.
- The processes included no element of risk analysis with every programme being treated in the same way.
- Academic staff were ensuring they completed the paperwork but there was little evidence of the reflection and action which this should represent.
- Lack of linkage between the quality assurance processes and the financial and strategic planning of the institution.

The PVC asked a small team of quality officers and senior academic staff to work in partnership to develop a single standard process. The objectives of the new process were:

- to combine and refresh the quality assurance activities in such a way as to facilitate effective but proportionate consideration
- to align the quality assurance activities with the institutional planning processes
- to bring consistency to the way in which students are engaged in the discussions and the outcome is made available to students
- to ensure that the quality assurance could lead to systematic enhancement
- to ensure processes meet external requirements.

The discussion resulted in the process described in table 1

Table 1: Revised quality assurance cycle for the annual review of provision

Stage 1
School considers effectiveness of previous actions
L&T portfolio
Survey outcomes
Performance indicators
External reports
And develops draft action plan to address issues

Stage 2
Student: Staff forum endorses plan
School plan considered by Faculty committee

School plan considered by University Learning & Teaching Board

Stage 3
Summary student data and agreed plan placed on intranet
Plan feeds into Institutional Planning Exercise

Schools were required at stage 1 to undertake a review of the information relating to their whole portfolio of learning and teaching activity including management information, both qualitative and quantitative. Based on this, Schools developed an action plan to address any issues identified. This approach allowed a School to identify common themes across their programmes which needed to be addressed and

also to identify any programmes where there were specific issues needing special interventions. A simple template for the action plan was prepared by the quality officers. The headings reflected those used in the national student survey and it was agreed they allowed us to capture all the information we needed.

Table 2 – Action plan template

Aspect	Issues raised in 2008-09 feedback	Planned response in 2009-10
Overall satisfaction		
Teaching & assessment		
Academic support		
Organisation & management		
Learning resources		
Personal development		

As a key part of stage 2 of the process, students in the School were consulted on the proposed action plan through their student: staff forum. As well as ensuring students were engaged with the process of considering the development of their programmes, this also ensured that the School could test with its students that the proposed actions did in fact address the issues as raised through student feedback. The action plan was then further developed and any changes made before it was submitted to the faculty committee. All the action plans then formed the agenda for a special meeting of the University's senior committee responsible for learning and teaching where they were considered in detail. The approved plans were then put on a website accessible to students from the relevant School and students were alerted to its presence. The detailed plans also fed into the University's institutional planning exercise.

Table 3 – Screen shot of the Responding to your feedback website
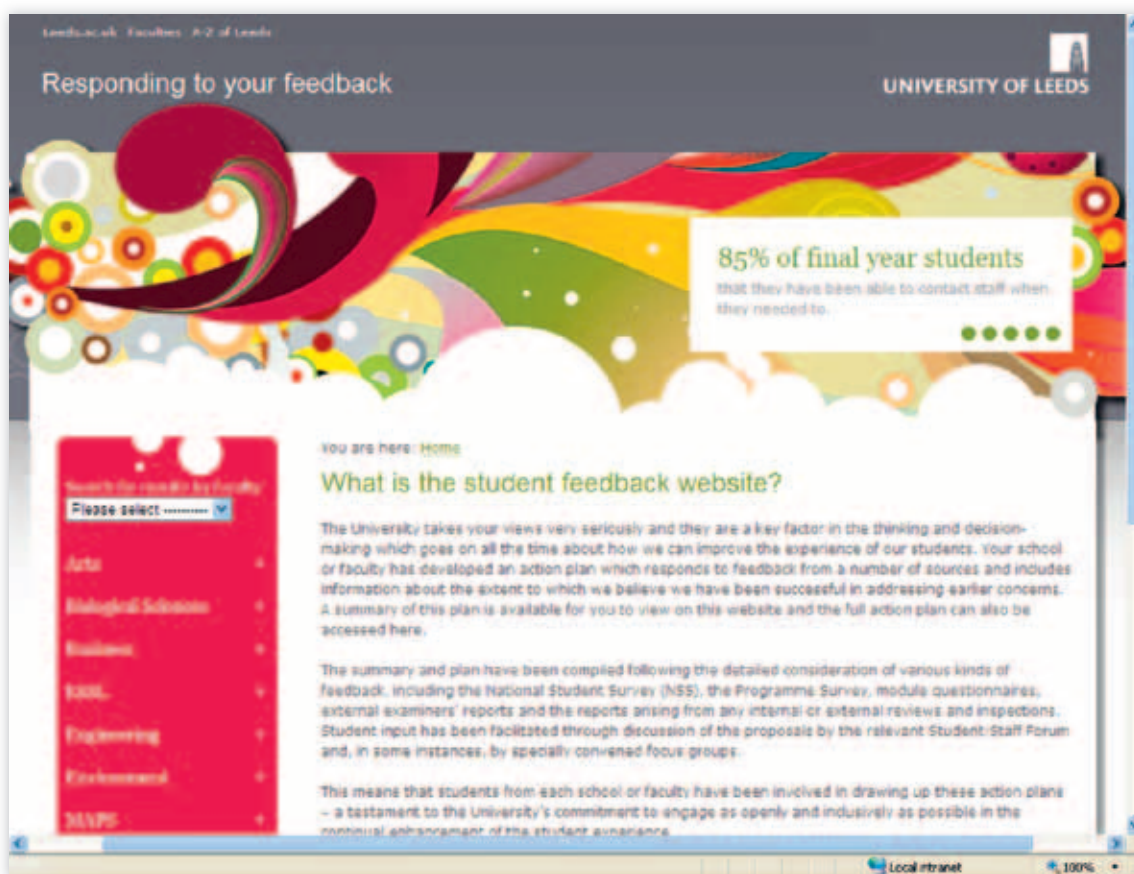
After the first two cycles of operation the process was evaluated. It was agreed that the new arrangements were largely meeting the objectives. The evaluation evidence suggested that the new process was being positively received by more academic staff because the value of completion of the plans was clear and the reporting seen as proportionate. There was also engagement with the process at the highest levels in the institution and for the first time there was appropriate holistic information on the provision of each School which could feed directly into the planning exercise. The students' views sought through the Student Union, were extremely positive both in relation to the process and the output.

There were some suggestions as to how the process could be improved and the following amendments were agreed:

- provision of a more student-focussed executive summary linked to the headline data. It was agreed that data was important but that this should be presented to allow for trends to be seen and comparisons to be made. It was therefore agreed to include three years of data for the individual school together with data for the whole university. This allowed students to set individual results in context. Students also wanted to see action which had been taken in previous years together with an indication of its impact, as well as intended actions responding to the most recent issues raised. Again, this allowed for students to assess the likely impact of the planned actions. Schools also asked for the opportunity to highlight any achievements made over the previous year.

Aspect	Student Surveys					
	2008-09		2007-08		2006-07	
	School	Uni	School	Uni	School	Uni
Overall satisfaction	92	84	95	85	93	82
Teaching	94	86	93	85	94	83
Assessment & feedback	76	61	75	60	71	55
Academic support	82	75	81	74	77	70
Organisation & management	87	79	90	78	90	74
Learning resources	86	86	89	88	87	86
Personal development	72	78	76	76	75	74

Table 4 – Example of an executive summary of an action plan

Impact of 2007-08 actions	1. Modifications to our exam/assessed work feedback system have clearly been well received; 2. Arrangements made for induction week have had a positive impact; 3. Away Day sessions gave all colleagues food for thought on how to improve student confidence; 4. There has been a 9% increase (79% to 88%) in positive responses on assessment and marking - a reflection on the improved procedures introduced via the VLE; 5. Students like the release of module mark breakdown via the VLE; 6. Good reception for feedback on office hours/dissertation mentoring/exam performance delivered by PT.
Achievements in 2008-09	1. An improvement in how students rate us in terms of assessment and feedback; 2. Excellent results on teaching across the board; 3. We have beaten Sheffield from joint second into third place in terms of 'overall satisfaction'; 4. Continued commendation across the board from our external examiners for quality of teaching and supervision; 5. Improvements in every area in UPES; 6. Overall satisfaction for TPG now at 100%; 7. Excellent teaching results in NSS and UPES; 8. Improved PT arrangements clearly reflected in returns; UPES returns on Learning Resources and Personal Development have improved.
Main actions for 2009-10	1. Initiate a further drive to improve the quality and usefulness [and timeliness for TPG] of feedback; assess as far as data permits the effectiveness of and student reaction to alterations in the timing of submissions; 2. Sharper distinction to be drawn between the nature and purpose of teaching between school/college and university during induction and subsequently; 3. Further exploitation of the VLE for purposes of teaching and assessment; 4. Encourage and facilitate social contact between History 'peers'; 5. Revision and expansion of marking criteria; 6. Highlight Leeds for Life initiative; monitor and develop the School's 'communication plan'; 7. Explore possibility of a library session for level 2 students; encourage staff to digitise resources; 8. Pursue initiatives to enhance students' employability; strengthen links with Careers Centre.

- A column added to the action plan template for Schools to reflect on the effectiveness of actions already undertaken (see table 4)

- Where performance was seen to be good, Schools were encouraged to identify good practice which could be shared with other Schools. This led to the use of a new website called the Casebook where examples of effective practice identified by Schools could be shared.

Table 5 – Screen shot of the Casebook website
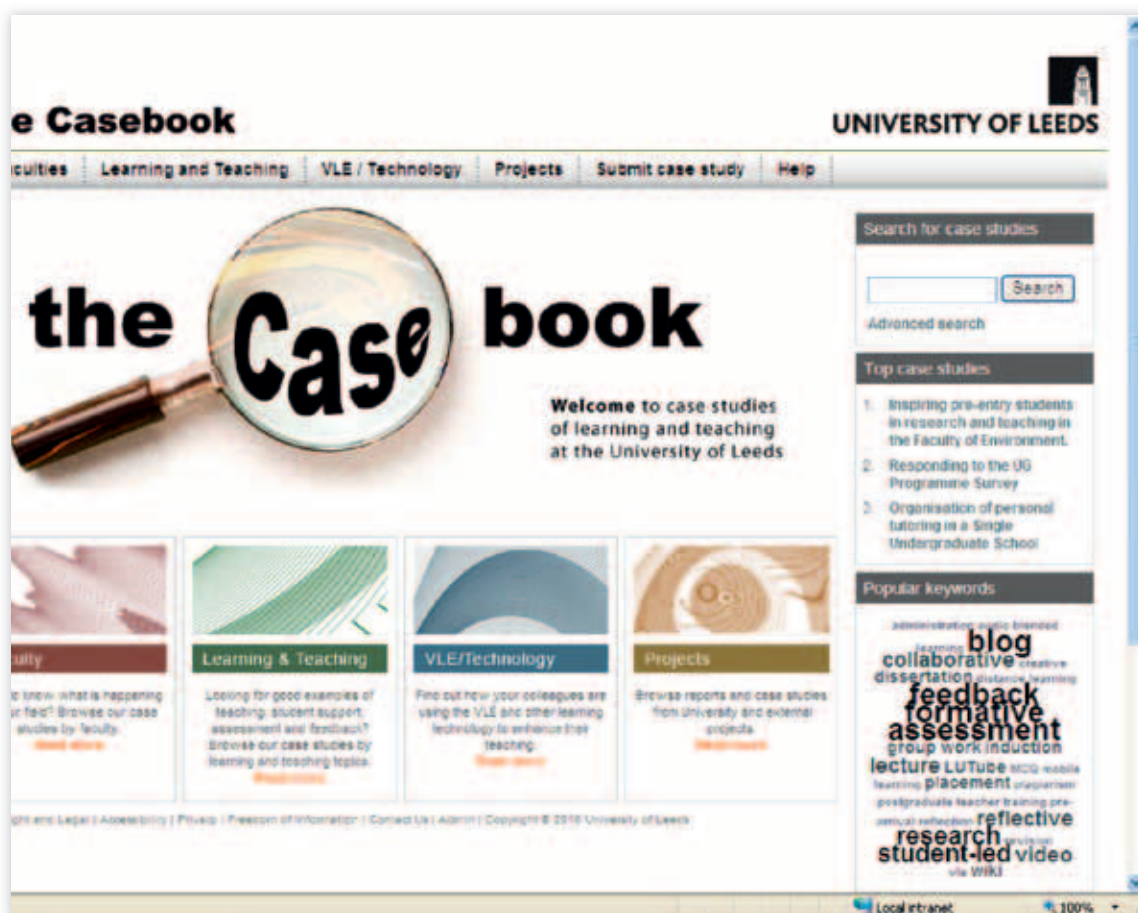
- The plans needed to be living documents regularly updated throughout the year and making this easier was important. Each School would also be visited by a team from the faculty, including a student representative. The team would have a minuted discussion about progress and also seek to further ensure that actions and practices which had been effective were shared.

- Whilst acknowledging the importance being placed on the data externally by students, in particular in relation to the NSS, for example through links from the national admissions site, staff were reminded that it was intended that the data should be used as only one of the indicators of students' views. The data should form the basis of discussions with students to understand better any areas for development.

In order to deliver a development like the one referred to above an institution needs professional quality officers who understand the needs of the institution and are able to reference any development in the external context thus ensuring that university-wide requirements adhere to external frameworks, working with academic staff who understand the idiosyncratic features of the different disciplines in the institution and how information might best be used to enhance provision. At the University of Leeds this joint working has been viewed as extremely positive in developing a 'one university' approach to developments.

The role of the quality officers is key to making sure that a new development like the one above is successful. As well as collating data and information to stimulate the preliminary discussion between academic staff and students, they are responsible for ensuring that subsequent proposals are captured and described in a way which can inform the action planning. This is important because clarity around the plans and clear accountability for implementation is vitally important in ensuring that the actions are taken forward as intended and that their impact can be assessed. The quality officers in institutions have to work in partnership with academic staff to deliver effective quality assurance arrangements and must therefore not be seen as 'bean counters'. They must be seen as helping and advising to ensure that the best outcome

is achieved. They must be accepted by academics rather than being viewed with suspicion because they are monitoring activity. They must have, and be seen to have, a good knowledge and understanding of the nature of academic work and, for that matter, of academic priorities. Ideally, they must be independent of the university's management structure in the sense that their advice and work generally must be based on academic criteria only and they must not use as the starting point management issues such as finance. The quality officers have a unique role in ensuring that the information obtained from monitoring activity can be used in enhancing learning and teaching and the whole student experience. They have information from internal and external monitoring, and from staff, students and external examiners and can relate this to developments in the Learning and Teaching Support Networks, as well as the QAA, EUA and work in other institutions.

Conclusions

It is possibly unrealistic to expect all academics to accept, if not welcome, the fact that 'external' monitoring of their work will take place and that this will involve some kind of reporting. However, it can be made more acceptable. Quality assurance procedures, external or internal, need to be developed collaboratively between the academic community in an institution who understands special disciplinary requirements and the professional quality officers who can bring a sense of the national and European context. They need to have clear objectives, one of which needs to be ensuring proportional bureaucracy. Then we can begin to demonstrate the Bologna Agreement's basic principle that "quality assurance for accountability is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005, p.13). This will be the most convincing argument to ensure quality assurance becomes fully embedded in an institution's activity.

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Partners or Counterparts?

Student Involvement in Management and Quality Assurance at Lund University

By Christian Stråhlman[1]

There is an increasing demand from students and their organisations all over Europe for involvement in quality assurance. Today, this demand is met with a wide international understanding that student involvement is a key factor in quality assurance. Student representatives and organisations are involved in the development and execution of quality assurance processes in many higher education institutions. While involvement is desirable, it puts higher demands on student organisations to act professionally.

Sweden has a long tradition of student involvement in higher education. Swedish legislation entitles students to representation in all decision-making and preparatory bodies at universities. At Lund University this has evolved into a student partnership model where student representatives have full insight as equal partners in university management. This has been a successful and appreciated model. This paper discusses how the partnership model has evolved, how it is maintained and how the student voice has changed.

Background

In the 19th century the first student unions were established at the universities of Lund and Uppsala. Already in the 17th century the students at these universities had founded student societies, called student nations, which were modelled from similar societies at the universities in Paris. Membership was mandatory for all students. In 1908 the State decided that the mandatory membership should be extended to involve student unions. By that time, the student unions had begun to develop their political agenda concerning education and other political matters. In the 1940's, the student unions were granted representation in some university bodies with specific focus on educational matters. Due to the mandatory membership each student was given the right to vote in elections of student representatives. The obligation to join a student union was removed from legislation in 2010.

Student involvement is proclaimed in the Swedish Higher Education Act:

Students shall be entitled to exert influence over the education in the institutions of higher education. The higher education institutions shall work towards students taking an active part in the work with further development of the education. (chap. 1, sect. 4a)

This is the legislative cornerstone of student involvement. It states that universities are obliged to ensure that students can participate in quality assurance. The Act also states that there have to be student unions at each university. In 2000 a more detailed paragraph was issued granting the student unions representation on all formal and informal bodies at the universities:

Students at higher education institutions are entitled to representation on all decision-making or preparatory bodies at the institution whose activities are of importance to educational programmes and the students' situation. If a decision or preparatory work is to be undertaken by one single person rather than a body, information shall be given to and consultation be held with a student representative in good time before the decision or conclusion of the preparatory work. (Higher Education Ordinance, chap. 3, sect. 9)

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A simple and straightforward interpretation of this paragraph is that students must be involved in each decision-making process on equal terms. With few exceptions this is what universities in Sweden have done. Students are involved in all issues at the university. With this amount of formal representation it has become natural for student representatives to take a more active part in the day-to-day management of the university, and, at some universities, to become an integral and equal partner with the academic leadership. One may regard this as a step up from the simple reactive stakeholder role to a pro-active, responsible and accountable partner role.

Student involvement and partnership at Lund University

Lund University, with more than 30 000 students, is organised in eight faculties, each undertaking both education and research. Decision-making and management takes place on three organisational levels: institutional, faculty and department. Each level has a similar internal organisational structure and has student representatives on its boards and management groups. Representatives are elected by the students enrolled at the Faculty or Department. Governing boards have at least three student representatives.

The Vice Chancellor answers to the board. His/her responsibility is shared with the Pro-Vice Chancellor. Together with three Assistant Vice Chancellors, the Head of Administration, and the President and Vice President of Lund University Student Unions' Association (LUS), they form the University Management Board. The University Management Board and the deans of the eight Faculties form the Dean Council. The two groups have alternating, bi-weekly sittings. Together they are the heart of the management of Lund University. Strategic and financial issues are all discussed and decided in one of these groups before the Vice Chancellor issues the formal order. Formal orders concerning strategy, policy, financial and legal matters are issued during weekly sessions attended by the President and Vice President of LUS.

The university also has a number of administrative groups responsible for a range of functions including funding, planning, communication and maintenance. Students are entitled to representation in these groups.

To elect representatives and to assert influence at the university the students in Lund have organised themselves into nine student unions, one at each Faculty plus one for third cycle students. They share some important characteristics: they are democratic, they are independent from the university and they rely to a large extent on voluntary work. The student unions at Lund University estimate a total number of 1 050 student representative seats to fill. The student unions have a hard task finding enough representatives to fill these seats.

In university policy student participation is regarded as one of the cornerstones in its internal quality assurance.

> High requirements will be established for student involvement [...] Among the conditions for quality assurance will be effective student influence at all levels. (from Strategic Plan for Lund University 2007-2011)

> Students and their representatives should not be viewed as counterparts, rather than partners in the University's activities. A good dialogue between the University at different levels and students, where students are involved as much as possible in the university's activities, provides the best basis for the proper functioning of quality assurance. Close cooperation between students and the University must be pursued. It is nonetheless necessary as a precondition for a more formalized student influence that the students and their organizations are independent of the University. (from Guidelines for student influence at Lund University)

There is an important distinction between student representatives as counterparts and student representatives as partners. Partnership with student unions lays a greater responsibility on student representatives to work with strategic issues. Students are required to have a greater knowledge of the university and of all issues discussed in the groups and boards. To cope with this, student representatives in the most important strategic groups must take leave of absence from their studies to work full-time at

their student unions as student representatives. There are approximately 25 students on leave from studies at the student unions in Lund. Besides representation, a great deal of effort goes into development of the union agenda and training and education of representatives. Since there are more than 1 000 students active in the student unions this cannot be ignored. There must also be a clear university policy that student representatives are valued. Having a representative function must not have a severe negative consequence for their studies. It must be possible for those who are elected as full time representatives to delay their studies for a year.

The student partnership model requires accountability from both parties. The student unions must trust the university to provide them with all the necessary information to participate in university management. Also, the university must be trusted to include student representatives every time a new issue is decided upon or prepared, and not to disclose "sensitive information". The university must trust the student unions and student representatives to be well informed about the issues at hand, and to be briefed on the student opinion. The partnership model has proven successful since students have been given the opportunity to act as well-informed and reliable "critical friends". University executives and students share the same vision and want the best possible education and research. When students are included as partners, more opinions can be raised, and student expertise is made use of. Management and students share a common goal – to achieve the highest possible quality of education and research.

Student partnership in university management – Two cases

This section contains two examples of how students have been involved in specific processes at Lund University. They are chosen to illustrate how student partnership is implemented.

Creating a new QA-policy

Quality Assurance at Lund University is based on a policy adopted by the University Board. The policy is valid for four years before revision. It is complemented by an action plan adopted by the Vice Chancellor. Since student involvement is considered an integral part of QA, student representatives are included in the process of creating the policy. The policy was last revised in 2008. The Quality Assurance Board was responsible for the process. They decided to form a working group chaired by the Evaluation Officer. One person working with educational development, two teachers and one student were also in the group. The group produced a policy draft, later discussed by the QA-Board (12 members, including 3 students). A final version was sent to the Vice Chancellor for discussion in the University Management board and in the Dean Council. Finally, a decision was taken by the University Board.

Note that the process involves students at all levels. In this case the policy discussion passes a number of students with different views and expertise. For the university the drawback of this system is that there is not only one fixed student opinion. Students, just like other groups of people, often have different views on the same issue. Student representatives also have different roles and expertise at different levels. An issue can be passed by students in four or more fora, and the work done by students in the working group is quite different to that of the student on the University Management Board. When students are included as partners it is essential to allow the student collective to be heterogeneous. Representatives may be elected by their unions to voice opinions decided through an internal democratic process. But they also have the responsibility to weigh together opinions in the student collective and to bring this opinion into debate with the university management.

With a partnership one allows students to participate behind closed doors. What happens there stays there. These student representatives must be trusted by their electors. It is not possible for the general student to know whether his/her representative acts according to the union's decisions. As the student unions increasingly work in the inner circles it is harder to explain to the other students what the student union does. When a partnership is not in place it is much easier for student representatives to voice opinions in public. As student unions become less lobbying and more managing, the students might feel that they no longer know how student unions work.

This could be a paradox. For the student unions at Lund University it has been important to be backed up by the university. The university helps the student unions to provide fora where they can present themselves and their activities. Also, university executives present the student unions to external partners as the "true" student voice. To avoid conflict within the student collective, it is in the university's interest to help keep the student unions respected and democratic. Nevertheless, a situation may occur where a student union is more strongly backed by the university itself than the student collective.

Expansion of Lund University Campus Helsingborg

Lund University has a campus in the neighbouring town of Helsingborg. It is a small enterprise compared to the activities in Lund. There are 2 000 students in Helsingborg and 30 000 students in Lund. The University Board has decided that the number of students in Helsingborg shall be raised considerably. This development has been suggested by the University Management Board and is backed by the student representatives. However, there has not been a consensus in the Dean Council. It is believed that an expansion of Campus Helsingborg will draw funds from existing activities in Lund and some Faculties have pronounced themselves against the expansion. The student representatives at faculty level have differing opinions as well. The student voice is not unanimous. There is, however, a consensus among the student unions that there is a need for more student counselling and library opening hours in Helsingborg, things that already affect the current 2 000 students.

In the Campus Helsingborg case, student representatives express different opinions in different fora. The issue to be solved is how to allow the student collective to have a joint opinion on one issue, but not on another. The student representatives in the Council represent all students at the university and they have to act against other student representatives at faculty level. These students may be backed by the management at their faculties. When this situation occurs, the management is faced with two contradictory student opinions. The opinion of student representatives at the institutional level is diminished since there obviously are contradictory student opinions. One is led to believe that the representatives at institutional level are powerless. This is not necessarily the case. Even if students disagree on one issue, participation is still necessary in order to work with those issues where students are all in agreement. Participation is still desirable, even if the student collective or the student unions do not have the same agenda. In this case there is a need for the students to raise issues about the working environment which is not possible without participation.

A different problem is the need to make compromises with university executives. Since student representatives are partners in university management, they are expected to stand behind decisions taken in e.g. the University Management Board. If there are different opinions they should be voiced internally; externally the board is unanimous. Since it is almost always easier to change policy from within, this is a price that needs to be paid. But it is difficult for the student representative to stand behind policy which is against the students' wishes, even if it is a compromise (unbeknownst to the students at large). One must always bear in mind that there can be a conflict between representing students and representing the university.

The net effect in the Campus Helsingborg case is positive for the students. Student-centred issues have been raised thanks to the student partnership. Even if the student voice is divided and diverse, it shows that the partnership model works. The diversity of opinions, even in the student collective, can be useful for the decision-making process. As students generally are good at raising opinions from all levels to the level at which decisions are made, the institutional level catches more of the intrinsic voices before a decision is made. Student representatives can sometimes serve as whistle-blowers.

A need for improvement

In 2007 LUS performed an evaluation of the student involvement at the faculties and the departments. The student unions were asked about their view on student involvement at their faculty and their departments, and if there were problems that the university needed to address. The student unions applauded the good communication with academic leaders at faculty and department level, to some extent also with administration executives. Also, student representatives feel that there is positive response to

student participation in certain groups and boards. Student representatives feel appreciated and respected by the academic and administrative staff. In most cases, student unions feel that there is a working student engagement at all levels of the university.

On two major points the partnership needs improvement. The first is exchange of information between university and student unions. Some academic leaders do not inform the student union of decisions made, as required by the law. This is especially problematic at the departments where many decisions are delegated to the prefects, and often no advisory management groups are present. But also, some teachers are unaware of "student rights" and do not know when to inform and seek advice from the student union. The second main complication to a fully working student involvement is an unclear organisational structure of the university. When organisation is unclear, student representatives are often excluded from voicing their opinion as decisions are made in fora where students lack access.

A necessary prerequisite of student partnership is a clear communication between university and student union. Student representatives have short terms of office since their time as students are limited by the length of their study programme. Student representatives at Swedish universities are often elected for a one-year term. Therefore, the student representatives often, but not always, are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the university since they often lack experience of university management. This disadvantage is enhanced if the university has an unclear organisation and delegation. A student union wanting to express its views in a certain matter must first know where that matter is discussed and who has the power to decide upon it. This risk is minimised if the university strives to act according to its mandate. Formal preparatory bodies should be created to a high extent. There is a distinct correlation between a working student involvement and student representation in advisory and preparatory bodies. The student unions have asked for a wider use of this preparation, since it provides the best dialogue between the university and the student union. A request from the student unions is that the university should list all bodies acting at the university on the university website. Transparency in decision-making is a means to a better dialogue, not only between academics and students, but with all co-workers within the university.

If you believe in the model, then how this improvement should be designed, decided and implemented is a question which should be handled by students and university together in dialogue. After all, that is what partnership is all about.

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