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Working together to take quality forward

Paper proposal form

Deadline 2 August 2013

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Author(s)

Name: Anca GREERE – presenting the paper at Forum

Position: Assistant Director in Reviews Group

Organisation: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA]

Country: UK

E-mail address: a.greere@gaa.ac.uk

Name: Catherine RILEY

Position: Head of Languages at the School of International Studies

Organisation: University of Trento

Country: Italy

E-mail address: catherine.riley@lett.unitn.it

(If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author. Please also indicate which author will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.)

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Proposal

Title: Engagement, Empowerment, Ownership – How to nurture the Quality culture in higher education



Abstract (150 words max):

Drawing on collaboration amongst higher education institutions in nine different European countries, this paper describes mechanisms which, over the two years of the SPEAQ project, have proved effective in developing a quality-driven mentality in three stakeholder categories: students, teaching staff and quality managers.

In spite of many national/contextual specificities institutions throughout the European Higher Education Area are frequently confronted with comparable quality assurance issues for which similar approaches may be adopted. This paper identifies these commonalities and details the type of actions which can empower stakeholders and enhance the quality of the educational experience.

Securing the engagement of stakeholders in the quality cycle often depends on the amount of trust an institution is willing to place on their contributions and on the way their opinions are elicited, collected, analysed, prioritised and actioned throughout the institution. Facilitating stakeholder ownership of quality processes is shown to be a highly effective strategy.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) issued by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2009) set the framework for quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area. Quality assurance policies and procedures as developed by institutions and encouraged by national quality assurance agencies are the result of a mapping exercise of the ESG onto specific QA mechanisms and methodologies. The ESG make a clear distinction between institutional, i.e. internal, QA mechanisms and agency-based, i.e. external, QA criteria, benchmarks often viewed as the lowest level of expectation which needs to be met by an institution. Hence, external criteria, even though constraining in essence due to their compulsory nature, are set at a minimum level, with institutions being at liberty to develop their own particular QA strategies and to design their own specific mechanisms to demonstrate they comply with external criteria. As a result, internal QA practices often exceed external expectations and become good/best practice for others to emulate. Once such practice becomes embedded in the sector, the QA yardstick is set higher, with more comprehensive criteria representing the pass level of compliance. More ambitious and competitive institutions will rise to the challenge and develop institution-specific mechanisms which have all the hallmarks of good practice. Thus, the quality cycle with its predominantly analytical and reflective character (see LANQUA Quality Model) becomes a virtual spiral moving to a higher level with each cycle of development.

Understandably, higher education institutions differ greatly, in terms of size, audience, mission, location, ambitions etc. Subsequently, institutions adjust their QA policies/strategies/mechanisms to cater for their own needs. However, as long as there is a level of convergence between internal and external QA mechanisms, institutions are at liberty to take ownership of quality assurance and enhancement processes. How much of this ownership is then passed on to the stakeholders 'on the ground', and how great their involvement in and contribution to the processes will depend largely on institutional policy.



In what follows we propose to make use of data collected under the SPEAQ LLP Erasmus project (“Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality”) by nine institutional partners from the following countries: UK, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. Our aims are to summarise key areas of concern for students, teaching staff and quality managers, and to detail the level of involvement of the three stakeholder categories, the challenges that may be faced, and the positive outcomes which go beyond the individual contribution to QA processes and extend into institutional benefits. This approach identifies quality-related needs on the ground and encourages stakeholders to take quality into their own hands and develop and implement their own initiatives by engaging them as full participants in the quality assurance cycle. A chain reaction is thus triggered: Stakeholders are consulted, separately and collectively, to voice concerns, provide opinions and make proposals, and also to shape them into initiatives that can be implemented at course, department or institutional levels. Stakeholders are thus given the lead on their own initiatives. This engagement in QA processes not only enhances quality but, more importantly, promotes a sense of belonging to the quality community of the institution, which also entails increased responsibility regarding the processes being implemented. The realisation that everyone can contribute to quality processes to enhance their own experience and that of others creates motivation to stay involved and ensure effective multidirectional communication among all stakeholder groups. The ultimate goal is to drive the improvement of institutional policies and procedures to ensure across-the-board practices, which, in relation to external criteria, may be rendered good/best practice for the sector. Thus, the overall educational experience is enhanced.

What students, teaching staff and quality managers want to invest in

In the present context, different groups of stakeholders frequently choose not even to voice their concerns/opinions regarding quality assurance, let alone get involved and contribute proactively to shaping the quality culture in their own institutional environment. This may be due to various reasons (SPEAQ reports, unpublished): they hold the view that quality assurance is imposed externally and there is little they can contribute within their role; they identify their own concerns as being unique and not shared by or of interest to others; they view quality assurance as a burden which comes with additional effort and responsibilities for which there is no recognition; they lack confidence that the institution will/can listen; or they have simply not been consulted. Such reasons indicate that institutions may need to change their approach in particular to collecting feedback, the very fuel of the quality cycle, but also in reacting to concerns, implementing effective (formal and informal) mechanisms and adopting good practices identified both in the institution and in the wider EHEA.

The SPEAQ project acknowledges that a top-down change of policy does not necessarily lead to a change of mindset or change of quality culture in an institution. More intense dialogue and interaction between policy and practice are needed to ensure that responsibility for quality assurance is more evenly shared by all parties concerned (i.e. academics, students, administrators, quality managers and agencies etc.). In 2011-2012 project partners organised data collection activities such as workshops, focus groups, interviews where main actors came together to discuss quality issues, identify critical areas and make proposals for actions.

Across the board, in all participating countries, students, academic staff and quality managers agree that quality in higher education relates primarily to the teaching and learning experience and all contributing factors, such as: a close relationship between student and teacher, where feedback is constantly exchanged and motivation is fuelled



from both directions; sufficient variation and flexibility in teaching methodology to allow for frequent adaptation to growing needs; transfer of up-to-date knowledge and professional experience; coherent programmes aligned with market trends to give a competitive edge; state-of-the art resources, facilities and infrastructure; student support services; transparent and effective communication of information etc. All these aspects are felt to contribute to the image of the institution being portrayed to the world. The reputation it builds is in direct relation to the evaluation of its quality as perceived by stakeholders. Hence, any quality assurance policies and procedures should be directly subordinate to the overall academic experience and must be a direct result of needs identified by different actors. Inviting stakeholder views, listening to their voice, encouraging debate among stakeholder groups and reacting to their suggestions builds up confidence and motivation, and results in overall satisfaction.

However, as reported, stakeholders' willingness to contribute to QA processes is often shadowed by the fact that results are not always made visible in spite of their investment of effort and time. Thus, unless prompted otherwise, stakeholders prefer to keep within their comfort zone and frequently limit debates to their immediate day-to-day experiences, reluctant/impassive to look beyond these towards the wider institutional picture and to reflect upon their actions and their roles within existing structures. Specifically, quality managers tend to talk more about the procedures in place and the difficulties that arise in trying to engage students and staff. They also acknowledge that they play a support function and any recommended action they may table would ultimately have to be signed off by staff with an academic background. From the interviews, it was apparent that quality managers with academic (teaching and/or research) experience have a broader approach and relate more easily to other stakeholders as they can empathise with their immediate needs. Students are preoccupied about the degree they will be awarded and employability, if the knowledge, skills, competences and values transferred to them provide them with a fair chance in the world of work. Nevertheless, they are also perceptive of the realities around them and whether these are set in such a way to facilitate their experience and ensure that they concentrate on learning rather than other more mundane issues, such as if they can find the lecture hall, if there are eating facilities on campus, if the library has enough copies of the book they have to read for next week etc. Teachers are concerned about the student-teacher ratio in class, the facilities in the classroom, the way students evaluate them and whether students apply relevant criteria for quality judgements; they also feel pressure to constantly respond to growing expectations from their specific fields, often without receiving any recognition for outstanding performance or any proper support for development.

Regarding the need for intervention, some areas deemed as requiring action are common to all stakeholder groups and countries represented, as summarised below.

- Quality processes should be generated from within the system and must become second-nature rather than burdensome and bureaucratic. All stakeholders need to be motivated and participation facilitated;
- A feedback culture needs to be improved so as to impact increasingly. The developmental role of feedback needs to be emphasised and stakeholders need to be supported in providing/reacting to feedback. To this aim, student (course) evaluations must be revisited;
- Communication channels, amongst all participants, at various levels, need to be enhanced to ensure effective exchange of information and ideas;
- Curricula must be better streamlined, overall learning outcomes must be aligned with workplace requirements;
- Teaching methods should be student-centred and engaging, and good practices discussed and shared across courses, disciplines, programmes, departments,



institutions etc. Student feedback, peer observation and discussion forums should better serve this aim;

- Assessment practices must be transparent to allow for comparability and fairness;
- Staff and student induction should be both more comprehensive and tailored, including elements of quality assurance. Refresher training in QA should be offered to more senior staff;
- Internationalisation must acknowledge that specific quality measures need to be in place. International staff and students have various and different needs for which support structures must be developed. All stakeholders should also be aware of the challenges of the multicultural classroom;
- Promotion and marketing strategies need to be better focussed and resources targeted effectively;
- Appropriate infrastructure and services must support the academic experience.

Although all-encompassing, and seemingly necessitating the engagement of large implementation teams, all these areas, bar the last two, can be tackled by making use of existing resources, with no need for major financial investments. SPEAQ has proved that if institutional mechanisms of empowerment are in place allowing stakeholders to take on what they assess as doable, at least in initial piloting stages, projects can achieve sound results to be exploited and multiplied in other institutional units, and subsequently incorporated into policy.

How students, teaching staff and quality managers can invest in quality

Having pinpointed the immediate areas of improvement and expressed their availability to collaborate, working groups of stakeholders in each partner institution translated one of the proposals into QA actions to be implemented in the academic year 2012-2013, representing the second year of the SPEAQ project. Choices were based on priorities for the institution, potential level of involvement of stakeholders, and availability of resources. The initiatives were not provided with financial support from individual institutions; the main investment can be quantified in the time, work and effort of the stakeholders. Participants expressed great interest and were both motivated and gratified by the opportunity they were being provided with, the responsibility that was being placed on them, and the increasing sense of belonging to a greater community. Taking ownership of quality by testing out their own views, ensuring that those views have institutional resonance, contributing to the development of the professional environment alongside peers and other stakeholders, and getting recognition for these actions has proved to be a very strong incentive, and one that has positively driven forward the quality culture in all partner institutions. Without any orchestration to avoid overlap or to address all major areas elicited in the project, partners selected a variety of sub-projects from those proposed in Year 1 of the project, all converging in the common themes identified in the data collection exercise and involving the three stakeholder categories whose voices were heard.

Addressing all the areas listed above may seem, at first sight, a very ambitious undertaking, however, partners adopted what proved to be a sensible approach, breaking down the areas into more manageable actions which could be piloted before becoming institutionalised.

In Hungary at the University of Szeged, a module on quality assurance was designed and incorporated in a communications degree programme. The content input was the result of collaboration amongst staff, students and quality managers and its delivery was beneficial both to staff and students, enabling a better understanding of quality processes and the degree of involvement suitable for each stakeholder group. In the UK and



Denmark special attention was given to the enhancement of feedback, with the LLAS Center at the University of Southampton developing tools to encourage staff to deliver relevant, timely, meaningful and enhancing feedback to students, and to approach feedback as a dialogue, and the Copenhagen Business School analysing more precisely the relevance of student evaluation forms and designing strategies to engage students in a more meaningful evaluation exercise. At the University of Trento, Italy, the initial focus was to reflect on support offered to international students, however during implementation the project exceeded its aim and took on the broader theme of improving communication channels and promotion strategies for the whole institution. Spain and Austria inquired closely into curriculum coherence and, respectively, assessment standardisation, with Deusto University adjusting a degree curriculum in line with students' recommendations regarding relevance and employability and the University of Innsbruck developing assessment grids to support a more transparent assessment strategy to benefit all. Aveiro University in Portugal set up a monthly discussion forum to promote the involvement of teachers and students in processes from which they often feel alienated, and to encourage them to come together to voice their opinions and reflect on their practices in positive and constructive ways and thus develop a feeling of empowerment. In Romania, at the Babes-Bolyai University, it was felt that student induction could greatly benefit from student input alongside the more traditional teacher-tutor led induction. This resulted in the development of a student mentoring system managed for students and by students, under departmental supervision. The University of Jyväskylä in Finland further scrutinised internationalisation requirements and provided support to content teachers who use the medium of English to reflect and adapt their teaching approach and assessment methods.

In spite of various challenges reported, more of which had to do with logistics and scheduling, the outcomes are extremely positive and the potential for these initiatives to be acknowledged as good practice and be incorporated in institutional policies and procedures is very high. Frequently noted was the difficulty stakeholders encountered when they were faced with the prospect of leaving their comfort zone and adjusting their mindset to accommodate a more open attitude to think and act outside the box, or within other "boxes". Negotiating solutions by consideration of all valid views, even when conflicting, has proved a very rewarding experience and one with a profound developmental character. Stakeholders found themselves more knowledgeable and better equipped to take on a broader, more comprehensive view of quality issues and this, in turn, has led to an increase in confidence about their ability to valuably contribute to quality processes. Participants report that they now view their role in a broader perspective and are keen to take on renewed responsibilities, which previously they would not have identified themselves with. If before the projects, each stakeholder category believed 'quality' or lack of quality to be the responsibility or the fault of another category, as projects developed there was an increased awareness that quality practices are a shared responsibility based on the combination of informal and formal quality processes, and an understanding that the quality cycle must include all stakeholders in open and constructive dialogue. Quality is no longer perceived as being done to stakeholders, but by stakeholders. With this change in perception, proactive participation is in the power of the individual but is channelled into the community that individual belongs to. To quote an Italian student: "In short, I think the project left this spirit of a community which brings different actors together to discuss the best prospects for the community itself."

Conclusions

Frequently, quality assurance is interpreted as the body of policies and procedures institutions have to comply with, be they national, institutional or departmental. This



conception that quality is imposed from above, rather than the result of a well-orchestrated engagement of all involved, leads to apprehension by various stakeholders and a reluctance to engage in/contribute to such processes, in particular at the ground level. We strongly believe that if quality assurance is to be of shared ownership amongst various contributors to the educational experience, existing practices as well as future developments hoped for by stakeholders need to be consolidated into policies and procedures. Hence, bottom-up initiatives and top-down requirements need to converge for quality assurance and enhancement processes to be viewed as successful by all those concerned and to contribute to a quality culture valued within and beyond the institution.

The paradigm shift will occur under certain favourable conditions: where there is a better understanding of QA as an every day reality for all stakeholders, rather than an external imposition; where there is increased awareness of the three main stakeholder categories and their potential for interaction/QAandE contributions, where QA roles and responsibilities are better defined to enable stakeholders to feel more confident about their individual role and to be able to place this within the larger system; where institutions promote bottom-up influence on policy making through innovative and inclusive practices for quality assurance and enhancement; and where such QA tools are in use which all stakeholders can feel comfortable with.

As demonstrated by SPEAQ outcomes, the more stakeholders are facilitated to buy into the ownership of quality, the higher the chances are that their motivation to get involved and contribute to quality assurance will increase and this involvement will then ensure enhancement resulting in a virtuous quality cycle.

References:

LANQUA Quality Model in LANQUA Toolkit,
http://www.lanqua.eu/sites/default/files/LanQua_quality_model.pdf, last access 2 August 2013

SPEAQ website with project posts, www.speaq-project.eu, last access 2 August 2013

SPEAQ partner reports, 2011-2012, unpublished

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area - 3rd edition (2009) (pdf), ENQA publications,
[http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf), last access 2 August 2013

Questions for discussion:

- How do you involve disengaged/alienated students/staff who do not see the point of QAandE processes?
- How do you cope with resistance to bottom up initiatives from higher management?
- How do external quality reference points fit into this scheme/approach?

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