Title:

Focus groups – proposing a new tool for empowering students in quality assurance

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Abstract: This paper shows how two best practices in different countries (Malta and Norway) have been merged together to come up with a new and powerful tool for student feedback and follow up in quality assurance. The authors explain how Focus groups can be used to tackle problematic areas in courses or specific subjects. The benefit of such practice is that students are given more space and possibility to give their feedback as opposed to the rigid framework of traditional feedback exercises. This new approach will facilitate immediate action and review of the course or subject. In this article the authors also presents some of the limitations relating to this approach, but the overall conclusion is that most QA systems will benefit from this new approach to student feedback that will increase legitimacy in QA for teachers and learners alike.

Underlying the need of a new approach to quality assurance

All quality assurance (QA) must be successful at the local level, in auditoriums and classrooms, and QA should ideally happen in a dialog between teachers and learners. The paradigm shift towards true student-centred learning must also affect the students' role in QA, making sure that the perspective of the learners are one of the pillars of quality enhancement *and* assurance. A recurring challenge in QA is the lack of useful qualitative information that can be used to enhance quality. Most course/subject[iv] evaluations today are based upon quantitative questionnaires that often have too few replies which in turn affect the legitimacy of the entire evaluation. Information gathered through questionnaires are often not specific enough to tackle concrete challenges; the questions asked are most often too broad and vague to constitute a useful basis of improvement. If academic staff receive poor evaluations on teaching and curricula through questionnaires the information gathered is often not specific or

useful enough too trigger change and improvement. As a consequence there is a clear lack of trust in the QA system, and this is especially true of the academic staff[v].

The authors of this text will however argue that the biggest flaw in the traditional approach to course evaluation is that it is the administrative and/or the academic staff who define the questions that are asked to students. It is the staff who defines the underlying premises for the students' feedback, thus limiting the scope of what students actually are able to input into the QA system. This is not compatible with a view where learners should be put in the centre of QA.

We will therefore argue two things in this article: firstly that the way in which we gather knowledge and information at the course/subject-level today must be replaced, or at least supplemented, with a new approach to course and teaching evaluation and assessment. This must be done in a way that ensures dialogue, useful qualitative information, and that puts the learner more in the centre of QA. Secondly we argue that information gathered must be put to use/implemented and that the way in which QA systems are able to follow up on issues uncovered are the best sign of a successful system.

Merging the ideals of stakeholder participation, efficacy and efficiency we hope to present a new and comprehensive approach to course evaluation and follow-up. After all: Only when the learners are put at the centre will QA have a sufficient foundation to be considered both legitimate and useful.

ESU Study session – how this paper was the outcome.

During the study session "*Enhancing student participation in the process of QA in education*" organized by the European Students Union (ESU) in co-operation with the Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe, hosted at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg from the 4th to 10th July, 2010, the authors met and discussed QA and best-practice. The study session was a training session for ESU's QA experts. ESU's pool of QA-experts consists of students from across Europe and this article is also based upon the feedback the authors received from the rest of the pool of experts. The authors discussed and came up with one common policy of how focus groups can be used to obtain effective feedback from students, emphasizing stakeholder participation and how more useful qualitative information can be

included in the QA system. A presentation entitled "*Student feedback: a new approach. Information gathering and implementation of quality enhancement procedures*" was also delivered[vi]. This was also a useful opportunity to receive feedback on the challenges facing the new approach and how these could be overcome. The new approach which is presented here is based upon two examples of best practice (Malta and Norway) that has been combined into a new and powerful tool for quality enhancement.

Presentation of cases

Malta:

Throughout the academic year 2009/2010 il-Kunsill tal-Studenti Universitarji (KSU)[vii] met with the University's Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU). APQRU runs a Study Unit Feedback system and in the past years the number of participants overall has remained quite low. One of the major problems was that subjects for evaluation were chosen at random. The Students' Council took the initiative to compile a list of subjects for which students wanted to give feedback and passed them on to the unit. Following this initiative there was a drop in specific cases were the response was zero percent or very low[1viii].

The Students' Council also conducted a study in general on QA. A number of questions were compiled by student representatives. These questions were quite flexible when compared to the rigid framework of question asked by the APQRU in their feedback exercise. These questions were than distributed to students via various manners. Overall the feedback from the students proved both balanced and valuable. The study was presented to the Rectorate and the Minister for Education. One should note the pro-active and student-centred approach whereby the students themselves took the initiative and had a systematic look at QA at the university, as well as defining the scope of questions asked.

Thanks to the initiative of the student council, a student representative was incorporated in the Programme Validation Committee (PVC). Through this student representative students can can now influence which courses/programs that will be reviewed and thus QA has a more targeted and learner-centered approach.

Norway:

In 2008 the University of Bergen revised its QA system, and a working group finalised a report that was later adopted by the university board. It was the view of several members of the working group as well as the students' representative that the current use of questionnaires was unsuccessful and did not play a constructive part of the QA system. Negative evaluations of courses were often "put on the shelf" and if there was any follow-up whatsoever the students almost never noticed improvements or knew of the QA systems' existence. It was also noted that there was a distinct lack of useful knowledge to take measures upon. One central recommendation from the working group was to start evaluation courses through focus groups. This recommendation was first introduced by the student representatives and then adopted by the rest of the working group. There was a consensus that the way of evaluating courses through questionnaires was flawed, and that the results of these evaluations often did not form a sufficient basis to call for action or improvement. Evaluating through focus groups was considered superior in terms of outcome and usefulness, although this form of evaluation is both vulnerable and more technical then the relatively `easy´ task of putting together a questionnaire. However, when this approach fails in gathering information in a useful way it was decided to call for course evaluation based on dialogue through focus groups; emphasizing immediate feedback and qualitative input into the QA system. Another Norwegian university also had very good experiences with the use of focus groups and they served as inspiration[ix].

How can these ideals be merged?

One central challenge to our new approach is whether or not `our´ cases are transferable to other contexts and institutions, and whether or not the ideas in our new approach can be implemented. As Seawright and Gerring notes: "*There is only one situation in which a case study* […] *need not be concerned with the representativeness of* [the] *chosen case: this is the influential case research design, where a case is chosen because of its possible influence on a cross case model and hence is not expected to be representative on a larger sample*"[x]. We would like to stress that the new approach that is presented in this article so far is a theoretical construction. The new approach came into existing when the authors were discussing examples of best-practice in QA at their own institutions. Effort was therefore made to try to single out the aspects of the various `cases´ and how the *ideas and ideals* behind these could be identified and made transferable. Being (so far) simply a theoretical construction the new

approach has both drawbacks and advantages. One the one side it can be argued that this approach has not been tested in real-life and that it is therefore difficult to determine if it would be a useful tool at all! On the other side we would argue that the principles (*ideas and ideals*) behind the two cases are not only transferable and should be used for inspiration, but also point to the fact that these cases (Malta and Norway) have had a clear and positive effect. In writing this article the authors took great care in recognising what aspects of the various cases that are transferable and we will argue that by merging these two cases we not only get a new and comprehensive approach, but also end up strengthening the core elements of the various cases. It is especially important to point out the similarities in the authors' perception of QA: dialogue based, qualitative, stakeholder participation and focus on enhancement. With this in mind it is easy to recognise why these cases fit together so well in a unified new approach, and how readers might use this insight into their own QA-systems.

In summary the underlying and transferable ideas can briefly be identified as follows:

Malta
Students decide what courses need to be evaluated; a pro-active and student-centred approach whereby the students themselves take the initiative; students can directly pass on their suggestions to the QA unit; students to have key role in quality enhancement.

Norway
Focus groups to enhance legitimacy of QA, give useful and qualitative information, and put the learners in the centre of QA; to provide information through discussion; Ensure that information is inputted into the QA system; QA reports made public for students; students setting the terms for evaluation.

A new approach – what is this all about?
The main stakeholder of the whole process of QA is the student. Thus the quality process needs to be student centred[xi]. In fact students can give a great contribution in QA. Peter Williams, former ENQA President has stressed that *"The rich diversity of student involvement with QA provide us with an abundant resource from which we can research and share good practice and so help all involved to learn and to develop"*[xii]. This new approach is

indeed about consulting with students in an effective way. Via this approach students will be placed in the centre of the evaluation of teaching quality[xiii].

In cases were study units for evaluations are chosen at random, there is a big probability that units which currently have problems will not be assessed. This system will ensure that these study units will also be taken into consideration.

In cases of problematic areas where study units require targeted attention and follow up, Focus groups will ensure that challenges are tackled in the most effective and concrete manner since focus groups can be tailored for specific purposes. This will also increase trust and cooperation between the students, academic- and QA staff, as well as facilitating follow up. Moreover, students are also convinced that the quality of individual study programmes and the relevant subjects/courses are much more crucial to quality than the quality of the institution itself[xiv]. This gives an indication of the importance of a learner centered approach to QA.

How it will work.

The new approach in student feedback can be divided into 6 main steps. These should be considered as suggestions:

1. Student representatives at various levels or students in general, recognise a serious challenge in a subject. The student's organization can also gather information regarding challenges in a subject.

2. The Council/Union, student representatives or the students will inform the QA unit which is entrusted with the role of coordinating the focus groups. This will ensure anonymity and no interface will be made with the academics because this might hinder students from approaching the QA unit.

3. The QA staff appoints a focus evaluation group. The group has to be comprised of students as well as an administrative staff member of the QA unit/faculty QA responsible. Students can be selected/appointed in a variety of ways. In cases of serious problems and when resources and time is available, the unit might decide to

appoint more than one focus group. The role of the administrative staff is to moderate the work and ensure the overall quality of the work, as well as ensuring its follow up.

4. The focus group can meet four times. Once before the subject is delivered to students, twice throughout the course and once after the students sit for the exams. The focus group will than publish a report through the QA unit. The QA unit will then meet with the academic staff to discuss the report and problems outlined by the students.

> **Comment [CHB1]:** I deleted this sentence since a major issue for QA is the assessment of students. For instance one professor can give impossible exams and if this happens the QA system must register this.

5. Following this meeting the academic staff will come up with a number of proposals for improvement (or counter arguments to the report published by the QA unit, if any).

6. The information gathered will be included in the programme-review by the academic staff and the internal QA unit. The QA unit may decide to direct its concern and/or consult with any other University body such as a discipline committee in cases were serious and drastic actions need to be taken.

How this new approach will work can be summarised in the Student feedback loop as shown in diagram 1.

Programme
review

Student union/
Student reps/
Students
recognize
problems in a
subject

**Student feedback
loop**

Academic staff
follow up with
QA unit

Students inform
QA-unit

Focus group
publishes
a report and
QA-unit
meets with
academic staff
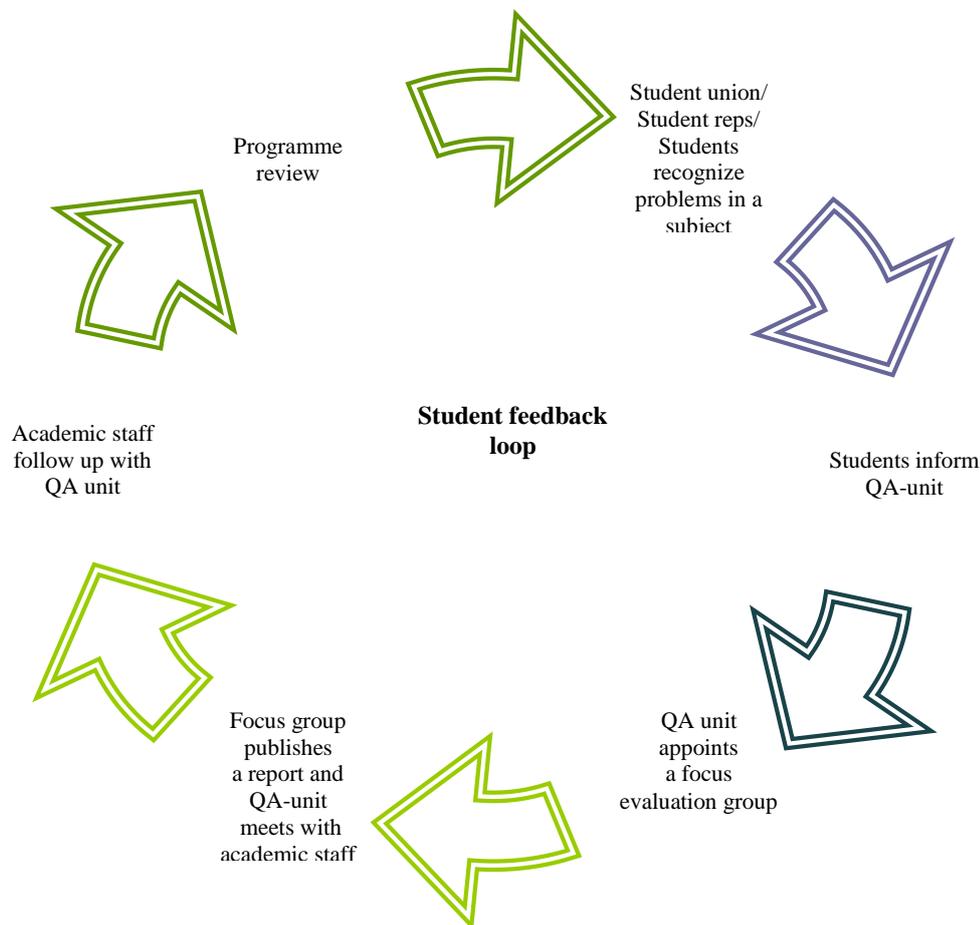
QA unit
appoints
a focus
evaluation group

Diagram 1: The student feedback loop.

A supplement to the student-initiated approach

Given the cyclical nature of QA-practices at most institution one can also consider to include focus groups as a new way of assessing teaching quality, replacing or complementing questionnaires. A variety of approaches are possible and to mention a few:

- Focus groups are used on courses that have an unsatisfactory number of replies to questionnaires.
- Focus groups can simply replace the use of questionnaires.
- Focus groups can be used to supplement questionnaires in `big´ courses with many students.

- On small and specialised courses where there are too few students to use questionnaires the use focus groups is superior. This is especially relevant for the Master- and ph.d.-level.
- When setting up new courses focus groups can be used to improve/assure quality when a course is new (before current practices are institutionalized). For instance all new courses must be evaluated by a focus groups within one year after it is set up.

A focal point is that focus groups should be included in the `QA-toolbox´ available for staff and students. This would usually happen after trying out this practice at the institution and gathering experiences in the institutions' own context. A key strength of the new approach presented in this article is its flexibility and how it can be tailored to meet specific needs, be they students' or staffs'.

SWOT analysis of the new approach

Since this new approach so far is a purely theoretical construction (although based upon two cases of best-practice) we cannot analyse or measure its effect fully. We will therefore present a brief SWOT analysis that will give an overview of how we perceive this and this analysis will hopefully form the basis of several useful discussions that can strengthen our proposal. Due to the limited space available the analysis will be concise.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Student centred: students set the terms in dialog with staff • Respects autonomy and academic freedom – stakeholders define topics • Useful and qualitative output for quality enhancement	• Not fit for all • Complicated and vulnerable • Requires more resources and attention from staff
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Flexible (can be combined with other measures) • Easily integrated into most QA systems	• Selection bias and threats relating to the members of the focus group • Only a theoretical construction so far (not yet tested)

• Can greatly increase transparency and legitimacy of QA system	• Difficulties in ensuring student participation?

Table 1: SWOT analysis of the new approach.

The SWOT overview gives a very brief and short picture on how we perceive our new approach. We would like to stress that our idea has yet to materialise, if that should happen that would present an interesting chance to gain more experience and knowledge. Since we are putting forward this idea as a new approach we feel the need to present the potential benefits of this new approach, and they are presented in Figure 2 below.
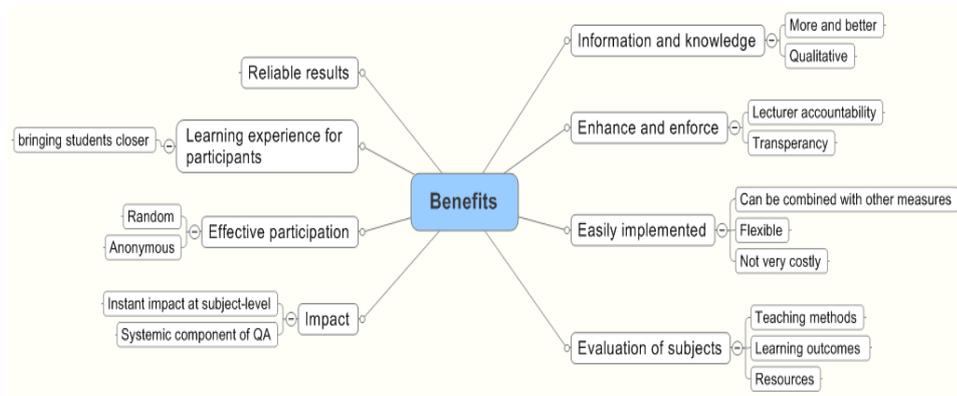

Diagram 2: Potential benefits of the new approach[xv].

Conclusion and a basis for further discussion

In this article we have outlined a new approach for evaluation and follow-up at the course/subject-level. The ideas presented are based on two examples of best practice from Malta and Norway, and in this article we have argued how and why these cases should be merged into a new approach for QA. It is important for us to underline that we do not consider this approach fit for all, nor is it presented in a very deterministic way. We have rather sought to present the ideas and ideals behind the two cases, and then presented an outline on how these can be combined to create a powerful tool for quality enhancement. The outline should be interpreted as one way of implementing our ideas; readers of this article and institutions should strive to see how these principles can be implemented at their own institution.

Going back to the introduction we would again underline the importance of integrating a learner-centred perspective in QA. Quality for us is defined in the relation between learners and teachers; the entire system ensuring and enhancing quality must be based on this very principle. In this regard we feel that this article is an important contribution to QA; firstly by pointing out how these principles can manifest in concrete practises, and secondly applying these ideals into a new approach that can be included in the already established systems of QA.

Three questions for further discussion:

1. Considering the fact that students in general do not participate in feedback exercises wholeheartedly, how will students be convinced to participate in focus groups?
2. Are qualitative results from a small focus group more reliable then information gathered through questionnaires that all students can reply to?
3. Is this new approach too technical and difficult to be properly implemented?

References

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[iii] "Enhancing student participation in the process of QA in education" organized by the European Students Union (ESU) in co-operation with the Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe, hosted at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg from the 4th to 10th July, 2010.

[iv] When referring to course or subject level we are talking about the individual study unit students follow, measured in ECTS – with clearly defined learning outcomes.

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