Working together to take quality forward

A selection of papers from the 8th European Quality Assurance Forum

21-23 November 2013
Hosted by the University of Gothenburg, Sweden

EUA
European University Association

ENQA
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION
FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EURASHE

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Table of contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements

The European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) has been organised by the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) since 2006. The 8th Forum, held at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, showed once again that quality assurance professionals derive significant benefits from meeting and exchanging ideas with their colleagues from various national and organisational backgrounds.

Participants from approximately 50 countries, including academics and administrators responsible for internal quality assurance, students, representatives from QA agencies, national authorities, intergovernmental organisations and researchers in quality development in higher education and research, exchanged, discussed and debated together for three days, true to the spirit of this year's theme "Working together to take quality forward".

The majority of the plenary and parallel sessions explored how both individuals and organisations can better understand the role that quality assurance plays in their daily lives, get involved and work together. In the discussions, there was a particular emphasis on the concept of "quality culture" and the importance of fostering attitudes and values. This publication gathers together a sample of the contributions to the Forum, and hopes to serve as an inspiration to everyone involved in QA.

On behalf of the Forum Steering Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support: the University of Gothenburg that hosted the Forum with wonderful organisation and hospitality; those actors in the field of QA who submitted 80 papers and workshop proposals to the Forum; the keynote speakers; and staff of EUA's Quality Management Unit as well as Events team, who spearheaded the organisation on behalf of the E4.

Discussions will continue in the next EQAF, which will be hosted by the University of Barcelona in Spain, from 13 to 15 November 2014. We look forward to welcoming you then.

Norma Ryan
Chair, Forum Steering Committee

Engagement, empowerment, ownership – How to nurture the quality culture in higher education

By Anca Greere[23] and Catherine Riley[24]

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. 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 at liberty to develop their own particular QA strategies and to design their own specific mechanisms and methodologies to demonstrate (how well) they comply with external criteria. In practice, internal QA practices often exceed external expectations and become models of good/best practice for others to emulate. Once such practices become embedded in the sector, the QA yardstick is set higher, with more rigorous and comprehensive criteria representing the pass level of compliance. More ambitious and competitive institutions will rise to the challenge and further develop such 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 to 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 during 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. 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. Our aims are to summarise common key areas of concern for students, teaching staff and quality managers, and to detail the level of involvement of the three stakeholder categories in identifying and meeting these challenges, and the positive outcomes which go beyond individual contributions to QA processes and extend into institutional benefits.

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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 provide opinions, to share views, to voice concerns 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 promotes a sense of belonging to the quality community of the institution, but 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 boosts the motivation to stay involved and ensures 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 current context, different groups of stakeholders frequently choose not even to voice their opinions/concerns 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, http://speaqproject.wordpress.com/resources, 21 January 2014): 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/does listen or take action; 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) actions and adopting good practices identified both in the institution and in the wider EHEA.

Project data suggests 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, agencies etc.).

Across the board, in all participating countries, students, academic staff and quality managers agree that quality in higher education regards primarily the teaching and learning experience and its key 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 changing needs; transfer of up-to-date knowledge and professional experience; skill and competence development; 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 also felt to contribute to the image of the institution/programme being portrayed to the world. The reputation it builds is thus 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 stakeholders' views, listening to their voice, encouraging debate among stakeholder groups, and reacting to and acting on their suggestions builds up confidence and motivation, and results in overall satisfaction.

However, as reported, stakeholders' willingness to contribute to QA processes is often overshadowed 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 to look beyond these towards the wider institutional picture or to reflect upon their actions and their own roles within existing structures. Specifically, 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 of accessing their chosen career path. 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 receive little or no recognition for outstanding performance in the classroom or any proper support for development, while feeling pressure to constantly respond to growing expectations from their specific fields of research. 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.

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 focused 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, as will be illustrated below.

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 were to translate one of the proposals into QA actions to be implemented in the academic year 2012-2013, Year 2 of the SPEAQ project. With no orchestration to avoid overlap or to address all major areas, partners selected a variety of sub-projects from those proposed in Year 1, all converging in the common themes identified in the data collection exercises and involving the three stakeholder categories whose voices were heard. Choices were based on priorities for the institution, potential level of involvement of stakeholder groups, 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 putting their own views to the test, 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 driven forward the quality culture in all partner institutions.

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 Centre at the University of Southampton developing tools to encourage staff to deliver relevant, timely, meaningful and enhanced 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 quality processes, 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.

The outcomes of all the projects 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. The sub-projects did, however, meet with various challenges, many of which to do with logistics and availability. Nonetheless, overcoming other challenges became the source of considerable satisfaction. 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. They are also more willing to value the other stakeholders' opinions. If before the projects, each stakeholder category believed "quality" or lack of quality to be the responsibility or the remit 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 the 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 the various contributors to the educational experience, existing good practices on the ground, as well as the future developments indicated and desired 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 everyday reality for all stakeholders, rather than an external imposition; where there is increased awareness of the role of each of the three stakeholder categories and their potential to interact, react and act, together and individually, to make significant contributions to quality assurance and enhancement; where QA roles and responsibilities are better defined to enable stakeholders to feel

more confident about their individual role which has a definite place 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 the 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.

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