

Title of the paper: **Student involvement in the work of ENQA and of its member agencies**

Sub-theme: Different approaches to QA and their impact on efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability

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Abstract:

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, Helsinki, 2005), the so called ESG, promote the involvement of students in the internal quality assurance of the higher education institutions (HEIs), in the external quality assurance of the HEIs, and in the activities of the quality assurance agencies.

This paper sets the scene for student involvement in the European Higher Education Area and explores how ENQA and its member agencies have involved the students in their operations and what kinds of experiences have they acquired from it.

1. Setting the scene: ESG and the Bologna Process Indicators on Student Involvement

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, Helsinki, 2005)¹, the so called ESG, constitute the main framework for quality assurance in the 46 signatory countries of the Bologna Process. The ESG form the membership criteria of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, as well as the entry criteria for the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The ESG include the students as the key stakeholder group in parallel to the higher education institutions (HEIs) and labour market representatives in matters of quality assurance (QA) and emphasise that students' interests should be at the forefront of the external QA processes.

Part 1 of the ESG, devoted for the internal QA of HEIs, promotes the role of students in the institutional QA strategies and policies as well as promotes their participation in the actual QA activities. This can be done, for example, through inclusion of students as full members of the internal quality management committees of the HEIs. Part 2 of the ESG, which deals with external QA of the HEIs, underlines the involvement of students in the external QA processes to which the HEIs are subject, i.e. in the activities of the quality assurance bodies. This means that students should be included as members in the review teams put in place by the QA bodies to evaluate or accredit an institution or a programme. Part 3 of the ESG, which defines the goals for the quality of the QA bodies themselves and recommends them to “take their own medicine” by undergoing an external review on a regular basis, emphasises the importance to include a student member in the review team that evaluates the agency.

¹ [http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf)

ENQA is an umbrella organisation for quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. The majority of its 48 member agencies, the Full Members, operate according to the ESG, and the rest, the Candidate Members, is expected to do so in one-to-two years' time. This means that these agencies, as well as the HEIs evaluated by them, follow the above-mentioned standards and guidelines for student involvement in quality assurance, or are shortly about to do so.

In addition, the **Bologna Process** has in place a **stocktaking exercise for its 46 signatory countries** to be carried out every two years in view of the biannual Ministerial meetings, which includes indicators on QA. The exercise has five different scores, varying from "green" to "red". The 2009 list of indicators includes, as one of the three aspects in the national implementation of the ESG, the Level of student participation in quality assurance. In order to obtain "green", i.e. the highest score, the following has to be met at the national level: "In all quality assurance reviews, students participate at five levels:

- in the governance of national bodies for quality assurance;
- in external reviews of HEIs and/or programmes: either in expert teams, as observers in expert teams or at the decision making stage;
- in consultation during external reviews;
- in internal QA processes;
- in preparation of self-assessment reports.”²

For the "light green", four levels of the above-mentioned have to be met; for the "yellow", three levels; and for the "orange", two. "Red" is the lowest score, and means that either the students cannot participate in any of the levels mentioned, or they can participate in just one of them. The integral stocktaking report will be submitted to, and the results are published at, the ministerial meeting of Leuven on 28-29 April 2009.

In the 2007 stocktaking report³, which had similar requirements for quality assurance as the forthcoming one, it was concluded that "student involvement in quality assurance had grown significantly since 2005. Every country had achieved some level of student participation in quality assurance, and in more than two-thirds of countries students were participating in at least three of the four levels." These findings were backed up by European University Association's (EUA) Trends V report as well as by surveys from the European Students' Union (ESU)⁴ and ENQA⁵.

2. Experiences from ENQA

ENQA defines the European Students' Union (ESU) as one of its main partners in the Bologna Process. The other two are the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). Together these four organisations form the **E4 Group** which deals with higher education matters that have a link to quality. The common undertakings of this E4 Group include the annual European Quality Assurance Fora, the ESG, and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). This stakeholder approach to quality – involving the QA agencies, students and HEIs – has proven to be very fruitful, and several future projects, as the evaluation of EQAR, are to be taken on by the "four E's".

² Bologna Process Stocktaking Indicators 2009.

³ Bologna Process Stocktaking, London 2007.

⁴ Bologna with student eyes, London 2007.

⁵ Student involvement in the processes of quality assurance agencies, Helsinki 2006.

The ESG introduced the reviews of quality assurance agencies on regular intervals of five years. All **ENQA member agencies are to be reviewed by 2010** in order to reconfirm their membership in the association. These reviews of agencies can be coordinated by a national authority, by ENQA, or by another European QA agency or body. Both the ESG as well as “The guidelines for national reviews of ENQA member agencies”⁶ suggest that the evaluation teams for the reviews of the quality assurance agencies should include a student member.

The ENQA-coordinated reviews always include a student member, the nomination of which is asked from ESU. The student member and the other members of the review team are expected to have some knowledge of the language and a good knowledge of the higher education system of the country where the agency under review is located. The same responsibilities and expectations prevail for the student member as for the other members of the team. The student member receives the same briefing and the same fee as the other team members (except for the Chair and Secretary, who receive higher fees in compensation for their more demanding tasks). For the time being, neither in the ENQA-coordinated reviews nor in the other agency reviews, a student member has functioned as the Secretary or Chair of the review.

3. Experiences from ENQA member agencies

The ENQA survey “Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond”⁷ with 51 agency respondents (ENQA members, associates and affiliates) looked, among others, at the student involvement. The survey highlighted that in 53% of cases students have a formal say when HEIs specify processes and criteria for their external quality assurance and in 71.7% of cases the students are part of the self-evaluation teams of the HEIs. In 93.3% of the cases the students are interviewed during the site-visits to the HEIs. The same survey further revealed that in 29% cases students may suggest or nominate members for the external expert panels used by the agencies; that in 57% of cases the expert panels include students; and that in 49% of cases students have a role in the agencies’ decision-making bodies.

The overall experiences of the ENQA member agencies in involving students have been positive, and the agencies have been truly satisfied with the student members in their review teams. The commonly shared perception is that student involvement in the quality assurance processes is crucial for better responsiveness to the needs of a changing labour market and of an increased emphasis on students’ employability. The advantages of a partnership approach, including the stakeholders as encouraged by the Bologna Process, are evident.

As for the **challenges of student involvement**, different traditions and cultural contexts exist, and there are agencies that have been involving students since the late 1960’s, while the others have just recently begun. For the same reasons, a model that works in one country does not necessarily work in another. In some countries profound legal and cultural changes would be required in order to allow student involvement at all levels of higher education system; while in others there might be formally adequate legal provisions that just don’t work in practise. In some countries, legal changes have already been introduced regarding the student involvement, as for example in Switzerland, as a consequence of the ESG and of the Bologna Process. But in several cases the cultural changes are more challenging and time-taking than the legal ones. However, the agencies are encouraged by ENQA, and by the Bologna Process, to take the necessary steps to develop in this respect.

⁶ Helsinki, 2006.

⁷ Helsinki, 2008.

What comes to the practical challenges of the student involvement, the agencies and HEIs should take into consideration the increasing study workload of the students and other time constraints (examination periods, graduation, etc.) when planning for their training and employment.

4. In conclusion

Both ENQA and its member agencies appreciate and have learned a lot from the perspective the students have brought into their work. The stakeholder approach places the student at the centre of learning also in the field of QA. This approach also contributes positively to transparency, which is one of the main operational goals of the QA agencies, of ENQA and of the Bologna Process.