The European Students' Union

ESU
european students' union

QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

FOR STUDENTS

A STUDENT QUALITY CONCEPT

TRUST ★ TRAINING
QUALITY
★ FOR ALL ★
EDUCATION
OWNERSHIP ★ PARTICIPATION
· QUEST 2013 ·

VOLUME III

QUEST

QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

Welcome! This is the final publication of the Quest for Quality for Students (QUEST) project, run by the European Students' Union.

The QUEST project has managed to analyse students' views on the quality of higher education to identify areas in which students can become increasingly involved in quality assurance and enhancement processes. This publication includes policy recommendations that summarise the main findings of the QUEST project in order to develop a student-based concept for the quality of higher education.

Previously, the QUEST team has published three other research publications and a handbook for students on quality assurance. All those deliverables are available for free on QUEST's website *www.quest.esu-online.org*

IMPRINT

QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

1 BACKGROUND

Being unique with its student-centred approach, the QUEST project seeks to define the student-based quality concept, outlining the understanding of students as the main higher education stakeholders of what quality means and what the measurable criteria for quality are.

It has been a challenging task to define a shared concept for the quality of higher education because stakeholders have had different views on it. The approach that has been taken towards quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area is a clear example of it, where the discussion about the understanding of quality was left out; notwithstanding that it was possible to develop a common framework for quality assurance (the European Standards and Guidelines) with a great success.

The debate about the quality of education in general, and of higher education in particular, is often led by governments and strongly linked to economic indicators such as the employability of graduates, drawing a picture of the so called ›efficiency‹ of the higher education system. That understanding of the concept of quality of higher education from the policy-making arena has always been challenged by students' unions, higher education institutions or teachers' trade unions, that do often have another point of view on how quality should be understood.

Members of the Steering Committee of ESU's Students Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance in 2013. More at *www.quest.esu-online.org*

2 STUDENT QUALITY CONCEPT

The project points towards students having a multi-dimensional concept of quality in higher education. However quality, in the eyes of students, is a much wider concept than the sum of its attributes.

For students, quality is essentially an experience or process that takes place within the process of how their expectations are met in higher education. Students' core expectations for quality relate to the teaching content and learning process while conditional expectations are concerned with the environment and conditions that are thought to be necessary in order to realise these core expectations, i.e. services, facilities and system structures for studying, as well as the academic environment and culture.

Students expect first and foremost to gain a personal growth from higher education and to learn more about issues that they find to be interesting and are taught by specialists in each field. A quality education provides the right tools for students to meet future challenges in their lives.

A good quality higher education system is characterised by removing all obstacles to access, and facilitating progress and completion; implementing student-centred approach to learning and fairly assessing students, braced by adequate student support services; ensuring links between learning, teaching and research activities; individual social and civic training for responsible and active citizens; mobility opportunities; academic freedom; and where students are considered as full members of the academic community and competent constructive partners.

Relevant aspects that should be considered in order to understand how quality is perceived, are the following:

- an adequate curricula (organised in learning outcomes);

- the learning and teaching process (student-centred learning);

- the learning environments (responding to students' needs); and

- the resources and facilities (including student support services).

Too heavy regulation on the learning process might lead to less innovation, which is, also, a part of quality education.

HOW QUALITY IS ASSURED AND ENHANCED

There is a strong notion that quality assurance is purely a bureaucratic process, which impact is often not perceived or comes with a delay. The level of knowledge among students on quality mechanisms is generally rather low. The closer the mechanisms are situated to the participants' day-to-day reality, the more knowledge they seem to have about them.

Adopting quality assurance and quality cultures is a gradual process. Key steps in this process are enhancing trust, participation and ownership of quality related activities.

It is important that students themselves are active in advancing student engagement, training other students and making quality assurance activities an interesting and appealing part of the university life. Higher education institutions should consider and understand the students' role and students' circumstances more effectively in student participation in quality assurance, taking note of obstacles such as excessive study workload, unequal status as partners and lack of necessary knowledge and tools.

It is extremely hard for students to engage as equal partners if students also assume/are given a role as consumers in education.

3 INFORMATION PROVISIONS

Usually students get most of their information from the websites of higher education institutions and programmes as well as from other students. Least used to gather information are student unions and websites of public authorities.

University rankings also seem to be used a lot by students to access information. Rankings can be an instrument for providing transparency, but it is very difficult to encompass the quality dimension of education, as well as reaching an appropriate understanding of the results of a ranking and the methodology used.

The big European initiatives and organisations connected to quality assurance, such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance or the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), are more or less unknown to students.

Quality assurance activities should not be limited to the teaching and learning process, as quality is also influenced by surrounded factors.

A student-centred learning approach should be adequately implemented by higher education institutions. Public authorities should support and promote the implementation of the student-centred learning approach.

Student participation at all levels of quality assurance and decision-making in higher education is needed in order to pursue quality in higher education.

The principles and values necessary to build quality in higher education are trust, participation and ownership.

Higher education institutions need to develop their communication and information channels in order to provide the relevant information according to the students' expectations.

More needs to be done in order to make the reports and outcomes of quality assurance truly accessible to the stakeholders and the wider public.

Further research is required on how students' expectations are generated and how quality is conceptualised, especially in relation to external influences.

STUDENTS EXPERTS' POOL ON QA

In 2009, the European Students' Union established a pool of committed and well prepared students that contribute to the improvement of higher education provisions in Europe through quality assurance procedures.

More than 60 students, of which more than half are women, from all over Europe were registered as participants in this experts' pool at the end of 2013. An independent Steering Committee supports the work of the experts' pool and launches once a year a call for new participants.

These students contribute to ESU's policy making process, act as multiplying agents in their respective countries, collaborate in several projects and participate in quality assurance reviews. ESU organises study sessions, workshops and other events for members of this pool where they are trained for these tasks.

Thus, members of the students experts' pool are expected to:

- share their own experiences on quality assurance;

- discuss topics on QA and/or student involvement;

- act as multiplying agents in their respective countries;

- disseminate articles or any other documents related to QA at national or international level;

- contribute to the preparation of the meetings and training sessions;

- give feedback to studies or other requests, such an ESU policy paper;

- inform the pool about any QA-related event at an international level;

- promote the ESU student experts' pool on quality assurance;

- identify themselves as members of this pool;

- foster student participation in quality assurance.

For more information about how you can join, follow or participate in ESU's Students Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance, please visit the homepage of the QUEST project *www.quest.esu-online.org*

Students benefit from participating in the QA students experts' pool through:

- learning about higher education in Europe;

- involvement in quality assurance processes at programme, institutional, national and international levels (e.g. evaluations of institutions and quality assurance agencies);

- opportunities to represent the pool to external events and governing bodies, such as the steering committee of the European Quality Assurance Forum;

- possibilities for networking;

- opportunities to participate in specially designed trainings for reviewers;

- opportunities to develop communication skills, etc.

The QA Pool members will therefore have the responsibilities to:

- share their own experiences on quality assurance;

- discuss topics on quality assurance and/or student involvement;

- act as multiplying agents in their respective countries;

- participate in reviews;

- disseminate articles or any other documents related to quality assurance at national or international level;

- contribute to the preparation of the meetings and training sessions;

- give feedback to studies or other requests, such an ESU policy paper;

- inform the pool about any quality assurance-related event at an international level;

- promote the ESU student experts' pool on quality assurance;

- identify themselves as members of this pool;

- foster student participation in quality assurance.

The European Students' Union—ESU is an umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students in Europe from 39 countries (September 2013), and through these members represents over 11 million students. ESU's member unions are run by students, autonomous, representative and operate according to democratic principles. The aim of ESU is to articulate and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow-Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. ESU cooperates with EUA, EURASHE and ENQA, in the so-called E4 group; is a founding member of EQAR; and co-organises the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF).
www.esu-online.org

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance Higher Education—ARACIS (Romania) is an autonomous public institution of national interest, whose main mission is to execute external evaluations of the quality of higher education in Romania at the level of study programmes, as well as from the institutional point of view. ARACIS is full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).
www.aracis.ro

The free association of local student union bodies—fzs (Germany) is the umbrella organisation of students' associations in Germany and a full member union of the European Students' Union (ESU). With approximately 90 member universities, fzs represents over a million students in the Federal Republic of Germany.
www.fzs.de

student participation in quality Scotland—sparqs (Scotland, UK) was created to support a greater engagement of students in the management of quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland's colleges and universities. It is the responsibility of a consortium of partners consisting of the main stakeholders in higher education in Scotland. sparqs supports an effective student representation. It does this by providing appropriate training and support materials to the full range of student representatives within universities and colleges and assisting institutions and their students' associations to make their systems more effective.
www.sparqs.ac.uk

The European Students' Union (ESU) is an umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students in Europe from 39 countries (September 2013). The unions are open to all students in their respective country regardless of political persuasion, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation or social standing. ESU's member unions are run by students, autonomous, representative and operate according to democratic principles.

The aim of ESU is to articulate and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow-Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. Through its members, ESU represents over 11 million students in Europe.

This publication presents a European student-based concept for quality of higher education: how it can be defined, reached and assured through students' eyes; as well as what information students think is important that higher education institutions provide to them.

The QUEST project aims at raising awareness about the understanding of quality from the students' point of view. Thus, this student-based quality concept can be taken into account and influence decisions on higher education, having a positive effect on it and improve its quality.

www.quest.esu-online.org