6. Quality Assurance

6.1. Introduction

Quality assurance has been one of the fundamental priorities of the Bologna Process since its very beginning. The Berlin Communiqué stated in 2003 that *the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area*. Currently, the Bologna process refers to the quality assurance, that is based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), as of one of three basic commitments of the EHEA. Certainly, the quality assurance has been given increased focus and importance, rewarded with high priority amongst policies and setting more and more ambitious goals. Over the years EHEA acknowledged students’ priorities and needs comparatively more. A considerable milestone was the adoption of the revised ESG, which underlines that *quality assurance responding to diversity and growing expectations for higher education requires a fundamental shift in its provision*. And the list of the tools to achieve the shift enumerates *more student-centred approach to learning and teaching, embracing flexible learning paths and recognising competencies gained outside formal curricula*. From the students’ perspective, the above-mentioned policy acknowledgments are certainly an extremely significant step towards a better higher education in Europe, however as this study reports, it has not been enough.

Setting the policy goals does not cause an automatic change. The observations of ESU, which are signified by essential findings in this study, clearly state that there is a gap between ambitious policy goals and the very mediocre implementation of the agreed commitments.

This chapter aims to take the reader through the many barriers faced by students across Europe to become full and equal parties of QA activities, and through the hopes and demands they put on QA to have a real positive impact on education. Hopefully, this will allow a reader to perceive the direction and amount of effort still required to achieve the committed goals.

6.2. Main findings

**Multipurpose Quality Assurance - more accountable higher education**

ESU believes that *Quality assurance should have multiple purposes*, therefore the authors wish to indicate what the main aims of QA have been in the recent years according to the
students’ unions. The role the QA plays as a policy and improvement tool has changed significantly in recent years. The Yerevan communiqué empowered a multipurpose QA by underlining its roles in learning and teaching. The revision of the ESG’s triggered a debate about their implementation in countries, which resulted in reforms of QA systems in Europe, that also influenced the national purposes of QA. The Revised ESG’s say: 

*At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement. Taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution’s performance.* There has been a shift in the perception of the roles of QA amongst students’ unions. QA has come a long way from being perceived purely as an evaluation system to becoming the main tool for building trust between institutions and countries.

According to 83% of respondents, the enhancing of study conditions has been indicated as the main purpose of QA, this was also the most popular answer to this question in the BWSE 2015. This proves that there is a belief in a constant improvement of programmes amongst students. More than half of unions stated that provision of information and transparency (72%) and holding higher education institutions accountable (67%) are important purposes of QA. Both answers are very much in line with the purposes of the revised ESG, which aims to make higher education more transparent and accountable. The next indicated purpose was building trust (65%). Interestingly, there is a great increase in popularity of this answer in comparison to the BWSE 2015 (then 43%). Less than half of the unions reported the importance of the following purposes, boosting employability (46%), promoting mobility (42%), serving as a tool for public control of higher education (42%) and improving recognition processes (37%). In comparison with BWSE 2015 the distribution of responses is more equal, which means that there was an empowerment of some, previously less recognisable, purposes of QA.
ESU’s position is that the external quality assurance systems should focus on a combination of institutional evaluation and programme accreditation, where the latter might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance. Indeed the combined approach was indicated as most commonly applied according to 65% of responding unions, which is even more than was reported in BWSE 2015. The increasing tendency shows that the application of both, mutually complementary approaches, is the most common and popular solution and the number of countries applying only one of the approaches is slowly decreasing.

**No significant progress in Student Participation in QA**

In the Yerevan Communique ministers committed themselves to support and protect students (...) to ensure their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions. This goal is still a long way from being achieved, and as an aim which was already acknowledged by the ministers of the EHEA, the national governments should focus on genuine implementation of this commitment. ESU’s policy states that students have been recognized as partners in some cases, but the work towards being full and equal partners needs to be further developed. This message is supported by the study, which draws attention to a demand for improved actions to ensure equal and full partnership of students in QA universally applied in every system at any level.

**Internal QA processes**

86% of unions stated that students are engaged in internal quality assurance in their countries, by contrast 12% do not know if that is the case. Out of 38 responding unions, one (Belarus BOSS) stated that students are not involved in the internal quality assurance at all. The same statement was made in BWSE 2015 as well, which shows the process to be stalled. Being one of the fundamental values of EHEA, the participation of students is a part of the Roadmap for HE reforms in Belarus, which was the focus of one of the Advisory Groups in the recent BFUG working period. The above mentioned statement by BOSS, as well as the report of the Advisory Group, signifies that progress is not being made and support for the inclusion of Belarusian students has to be continued.

In the vast majority of countries, the role and engagement of students significantly differs. According to 60% of unions students are full members of their bodies of internal assessment. But still, 26% of responding unions reported that students’ engagement remains limited to only being a source of information. Some unions elaborated additionally that the level of involvement differs vastly between institutions and it is hard to unanimously state the overall role of students in systems.
The level of student’ involvement in external QA has changed little from previous publications and it differs slightly from internal QA. A majority (79%) reported that students are included in external QA, the remaining answers indicate less committed ways of students’ participation. Three unions reported lack of participation what so ever, specifically these are the member unions from Belarus and the union from Ukraine. For the case of Belarus, as stated in the final report of the BFUG Advisory Group, the lack of improvement in students participation in the legal system remains as the main obstacle. In Ukraine the QA Agency is currently being re-established and students are engaged in this process. Meanwhile there is another accreditation body acting at the moment for which students’ engagement is not a mandatory requirement.

According to those unions who reported that students are involved in HE, 71% tell us that students are full-members within the external review panels. According to the rest of the
responses this involvement is limited to either being an observer (3 unions) or a source of information (3 unions). In some countries students are able to take the position of a chair or a secretary in external review panels.

Fig. 6.3: How are students involved in the external QA processes?

Governance of QA agencies

According to the answers provided, 70% unions reported that students are involved in the governance of QA agencies. This percentage is slightly smaller in comparison with the previous study results (74%). According to seven unions, students are not yet involved in governance (these are Serbia, France, Montenegro, Slovakia, Germany, Belarus, Belgium), two of the following unions reported that there is no QA agency in their country yet (Belarus and Ukraine). While there are fewer countries with no QA agency compared to the results
of BWSE 2015, the involvement of students in governance has not progressed since the adoption of the revised ESG and a gap remains in many countries. 24 out of 28 unions, who reported involvement of students in the governance of QA agencies, see students as the full-members of decision making bodies, while four unions stated that in their countries students are members of consultative bodies only. It is concerning that no union indicated students were involved as planners of evaluation/accreditation programmes, which means that full trust and recognition towards students as full members of the process is not achieved yet.

Responses to the question about students being consulted on QA issues by government raise a big concern. 58% of respondents affirmed that they were consulted, which is almost the same number as BWSE 2015 (58%). But the number of unions who reported not being consulted has increased (from 11 to 14). The ways of consulting students differ between countries. Usually students are members of consultative bodies (through QA agencies or led by a ministry), and they provide a direct feedback as national unions of students, attend consultation meetings for the sector etc. Some unions reported that there is no regular consultative process applied. Instead, the students are consulted only at those times when governments change laws and are obliged to get stakeholders’ opinion. As in other cases, here again, unions indicated that even while being consulted, the students’ voice is not being heard or valued, usually the consultation is being conducted at a late stage of lawmaker when negotiation around the major changes is no longer possible. Therefore, as well as ensuring the application of formal processes, more work should be dedicated to the empowerment of meaningful participation of students.

**QA experts’ pools**

19 unions reported the inclusion of students in QA experts pools, while 13 stated that they do not exist/do not include students. The study also confirms the usefulness of pools, as according to all those 19 unions they are also involved in evaluations and other reported QA activities. In comparison to the previous study more unions now report that pools are being operated solely by QA agencies (from 32% in 2015 to 50% currently), whilst pools being operated independently by an NUS remains the case for more than 30% of respondents. The pools which are operated jointly by an NUS and a QA agency were reported in two countries namely Ireland and Poland. In Armenia the pool was established recently in a result of cooperation between ESU and national stakeholders as an outcome of a Tempus project.
Obstacles to student involvement in QA

There are many obstacles that have a negative impact on the enhancement of students’ involvement in QA. For all levels and structures, thorough and consistent work should be dedicated to ensuring equal, fair and meaningful engagement of students. The first standard of revised the ESG states that internal stakeholders should develop and implement quality assurance policies, while the guideline states that this policy should support ‘...students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance...’. Another standard from the 2nd part of ESG specifies the requirement of (a) student member(s) to be expert for peer-review and the guideline elaborates on the need of appropriate support with training/briefing for experts, including the student(s). The position of students has been empowered on the policy level, but the real involvement is not yet a reality. The
maintenance of standards from the ESG has been mainly achieved, but is not supported yet by the accomplishment of the guidelines.

Similarly to the previous publication results, the majority of respondents (67%) stated again that the lack of information on QA amongst the students’ representatives is the main obstacle to their involvement. The provision of information plays a crucial role in quality assurance progressing. The lack of relevant information causes either the exclusion of students or diminishes meaningful participation. Moreover, it harms the involvement of any stakeholder group causing inequalities in information held. When students lack information about procedures, programmes or are not supported enough to be involved in the decision making process, they are left out of having any ownership and enthusiasm and consequently are not able to ensure any meaningful students’ perspective in the QA. The more QA is explicitly administration-driven, the weaker the motivation of students and their involvement becomes. Although the revised ESG had addressed this issue already in 2015, a transparent QA system is far from being achieved.

The next significant obstacle is the visible and tangible impact from the QA process from the students’ perspective. Almost 56% of respondents reported that students see QA processes being counterproductive because they do not attract any consequences. A lack of tangible results harms the belief, confidence and trust in a QA process and this results in resistance from students to be meaningfully active in the QA, as they are convinced that their engagement will be fruitless. Closing the feedback loop to ensure that students see their contribution to the QA is followed up on and relevant actions are undertaken for improvements is one of the solutions that will ensure some real impact and will prove in the eyes of students that QA can really bring positive change. Currently, students do not feel able to contribute to the process, they are not regarded as an active participants in it, and therefore the motivation for active involvement itself is compromised.

50% of students’ unions reported that students do not feel that they are seen as a full members of their academic communities. Aligning the responses to all the above mentioned questions it may be observed that lack of equal position of students is experienced at all levels of quality assurance, from institutional involvement to the participation in review panels. Students struggle with being perceived as less important, less knowledgeable or less meaningful stakeholders. A lack of an equal treatment is a significant obstacle since it results in making students uncomfortable and unwelcome not only in the QA, but within the whole academic community.

The fourth significant obstacle mentioned by respondents is the shortage of trainings on QA (42%). The lack of development and investment in the expertise of student representatives, a gap in knowledge of procedures and lack of awareness on the outcomes of a meaningful involvement of stakeholders, all result in both students and teachers being less confident about their participation in QA, which in turn results in being unable to initiate the
necessary measures required for improvement. Further obstacles reported by respondents are: QA activities not being facilitated or recognised (25%), the procedures not being transparent enough and the reports not being clear and accessible (22%), formal, tokenistic participation rather than genuine engagement (14%) and a lack of transparent nomination/selection procedures (11%).

Fig. 06.5: What are the main barriers that students find in their involvement in QA ?

Revised ESG do not yet have meaningful impact for students participation in QA

One of the main outcomes concerning quality assurance that was achieved as a result of the last Ministerial Conference in Yerevan was the revision of the Standards and Guidelines for QA, ten years after they were firstly adopted in 2005. The revision was relatively profound and set some ambitious goals for the quality assurance systems across Europe. One of the goals of revision was to make them more clear and easier to apply thereby enabling their genuine implementation.

The impactfulness of ESG was examined by the EQUIP project and according to its findings the expectations of the ESG are very similar among higher education stakeholders and national representatives. The final publication reports that although the ESG were not usually a direct cause for QA reforms in countries, they were used as a framework of
requirements and boundaries for policy makers. The project also observed a number of obstacles for implementing the theory into practise. The implementation of QA based on ESG in practice is still a challenge for some institutions, and it is not clear how to introduce the new approaches whilst having some boundaries in the existing system. The QA is perceived mainly as a bureaucratic burden, rather than as an incentive for boosting a quality culture. Student-centred learning is a well-recognised concept within the policy agenda but there is insufficient focus on real implementation.

In the BWSE 2018 survey the member unions were asked about their satisfaction with the changes to their national evaluation criteria as a result of the revised ESG. Satisfaction was expressed by 32% of unions, while 7.5% reported being dissatisfied with the changes made. It is an important message to learn that as much as 22.5% of respondents stated that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and further 27% unions were unable to answer this question. That means that although ⅓ of members see improvements due to the ESG, there are still a lot of unknowns which are probably a result of insufficient national reforms in quality assurance which would recognise the real spirit of the ESG.

**EQAR expected to bring more transparency**

In March 2018 EQAR celebrated its 10th anniversary. Within the last three years EQAR has worked on the newly revised ESG and has monitored the compliance of previously registered agencies with new standards and guidelines. At the same time new agencies that comply with the revised ESG were registered. The Promotion of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes also formed part of the focus of EQAR’s activities, for which the registration process played a vital role. The latest project related to EQAR is called DEQAR and aims to create a Database of External QA Results (DEQAR) by these registered agencies in order to improve information provision and transparency. ESU has been a member of many of the above mentioned initiatives and considers all these steps to be essential for making improvements in the European HE.

Within this study the member unions were asked if they agreed with the idea of having a European Register of QA Agencies operating in compliance with the ESG. Amongst respondents, 55% supported this idea fully and a further 21% agreed with some reservations. The remaining unions are either not sure - 7%, or they do not know - 17%. These answers are probably a result of limited awareness of the EQAR’s role in quality assurance, which means that the visibility and understanding of the institution should be enhanced. Since one of the aims for creation of EQAR was facilitation of trust within the QA, the unions were asked if they agreed with foreign QA Agencies registered by EQAR to be allowed to operate in their country. 20% of respondents answered that they should be allowed and the results should be automatically recognised in the home country of the agency. A further 42.5% of respondents indicated that foreign agencies should be allowed to be involved in cross-border activities but their decisions should require recognition by
national agencies. 2,5% stated that foreign agencies should be permitted only if there is no agency operating in the receiving country and a further 10% stated that they would be in favour of foreign agencies operating in their country but only if some additional criteria were met. 10% of unions stated that they are totally against the cross-border activity of agencies. 22,5% unions were hesitant enough to not provide an answer. All the numbers indicate that students are rather positive towards cross border agencies but resistance is still there and this is caused by the lack of trust in foreign institutions, therefore most unions see a need for some national regulations which introduce additional criteria.

The majority of the respondents (40%) identified the main impact of EQAR was the achievement of increased transparency in QA processes for students. Other outcomes such as ESG enforcement (9%), the possibility to choose an agency in a different country (9%), opening a national QA system to foreign agencies (6%) or to enable a QA market (3%) seem to have had much less impact for the respondents. One interesting remark about QA systems suggested that they were profoundly improved in accordance with the new ESG even before joining EQAR, therefore the Register has not had much space to practice its impact on reforms in these countries. One point which asked if member unions would support a further development of EQAR towards increasing transparency was answered affirmatively by 64% of respondents.

6.3 Conclusions and considerations for the future

The QA should remain a priority for improvements to be introduced at the policy level as well as thoroughly supported on the level of genuine application. The above highlighted lack of training and resources for implementation measures or resistance to the application of real tools for improvements harm the potential impact to be achieved with the QA mechanisms.

An improvement in study programmes still remains to be seen by students as the main purpose of quality assurance, but it is not the only important goal. Increased interest and demand for building trust and transparency through QA is also observed. At the same time recent developments in transforming the QA into something more than mere procedures and policies seems to be successful. Therefore our commitment should be to facilitate further and better fulfillment for the aims of QA and continue fostering cooperation between European countries and institutions that are built upon the trust.

The application of both institutional and programme-based approaches to external quality assurance remains the most common and more popular solution for external QA, meanwhile the single-based approach is decreasing in numbers. Nevertheless neither of the approaches should replace the other.
The stagnation of progress in the QA may be perceived as a disappointment. The vast majority of students’ unions reported the participation of students in both internal and external QA, but the essence should be sought in the quality of this involvement. For internal QA students seek empowerment, meaningful participation and real engagement, this kind of participation remains somewhat formal and tokenistic. Students are not involved as equal decision makers and they often struggle to make their role recognized in decision making. They remain a source of information but lack enough of training and support, all of which hinders their potential to be game changers. The situation does not seem to have improved in recent years. Students’ participation is recognised as an important policy goal, but has still not been fully achieved through the implementation process. The study reports that one of the main obstacles for students’ involvement is the lack of information, the absence of relevant training and a lack of transparency. These issues should be given particular attention. We should aim for tangible and impactful consequences of QA to restore the belief and trust of students in the quality assurance processes.

The overall perspective of the involvement of students in QA governance is of concern. A genuine inclusion of students as full and equal members has not been strengthened yet by the revised ESG and there is no positive progress within the last three years. Based on the data collected being included in decision making does not certainly mean being an equal partner. A relevantly low percentage of unions are being consulted by governments on QA matters, as highlighted in the study, and this means that policy-making should be improved to achieve the desired equal partnership and prevent situations where students are left-out or have limited access to information.

The revision of the ESG strived for facilitation of their application and making them a user-friendly tool to boost implementation, but as for now they are seen as a key policy goal for both the sector and national governments, but they have not been fully implemented yet. Furthermore, achievements at the policy level are not reflected in the practice of institutions. Genuine implementation especially at the institutional level has to be a key target, otherwise the use of ESG will remain on the mere level of policy goals and a tokenistic exercise.

Considering the progress in the development of trust and transparency as key functions of QA, the importance of the work of EQAR has to be emphasized. However its role still has to be better conveyed in order to raise awareness about its role amongst student communities. According to students, EQAR should remain a driving force for achieving increased transparency among stakeholders.
6.4. Recommendations

- Quality culture
  In general, the quality assurance needs to be treated as a quality culture tool rather than a set of tokenistic, formal procedures which are completed for their own sake. In order to achieve a stronger quality culture, the main focus needs to be given to institutional implementation. The individualised approach to implementation should be observed and applied at each institution since there is no one-size-fits-all solution in QA.

- Trust building
  There is an increased awareness of the significance of trust building as an important purpose of QA among students. This purpose should be widely promoted as it serves to ensure that quality assurance is based on credible, transparent, and relevant sources of information and explainable decision-making procedures.

- Mixed approaches to external QA
  Institutional and programme-based approaches to external quality assurance should be complementary towards each other as both examine different sides of education and institution.

- Implementation of students’ participation in QA
  An important policy focus backed up by significant resources for implementation should be allocated for the improvement of quality of participation of students in QA. The conditions for students’ participation should empower wide and meaningful participation at international and external levels. Equal and unrestricted membership of students in any decision-making/consultative body should be a key part of any QA process. Students should be seen as a crucial part of feedback loops within the internal QA, particularly when considering the improvement of study programmes.

- Students at the heart of policy reforms
  The position of students in policy-making at national level has to be enhanced and supported. At present it remains insufficient, and any national policy reforms on QA should target students’ needs. Students are crucial stakeholders and those directly affected should be actively present from the early initial stages of any policy reforms and their place in any lawmaking process should be ensured by the development of relevant structures.

- Students participation as a fundamental value of EHEA
Meaningful students’ participation should remain in focus of the Bologna process as one of the fundamental values of the European Higher Educational Area and should be granted more attention in the future work of the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

- **Transparency and information provision**
  In order to overcome the lack of information on QA, relevant training for students, academic staff and administration staff should be mandatorily organised and the provision of information needs to be improved to ensure an equal access to information and procedures.

- **Impactful QA**
  QA processes should be followed by relevant actions and the consequences should be constantly demonstrated to ensure the visibility of improvements that are the result of the participation of all stakeholders. These actions should be targeted to enhance effective and impactful procedures, as well as increasing motivation and enthusiasm of stakeholders to contribute with their meaningful participation.

- **Genuine implementation of the ESG**
  The implementation of the ESG should be followed both at the level of policy and practice and should be adopted both at national and institutional levels. They should be prevented from remaining a mere policy goal and address the lack of will/resources for genuine implementation.

- **EQAR as a transparency driver**
  EQAR should continue its work on transparency enhancement but its role should be also communicated in a comprehensible way and through wider channels for national stakeholders. As a tool EQAR should facilitate bringing a positive impact for increased transparency and trust.

### 6.5. References


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