Students' Contribution to Quality Assurance

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to highlight the necessity / importance of student participation / involvement in the general context of quality assurance in higher education. Achieving this goal is based on proposals, ideas, methods and tools that could be applied to make this participation a key factor in quality assurance within universities. The concerns at European level, the organizational and regulatory framework for quality assurance are analysed.*
Keywords: *quality, quality assurance, students, quality culture, ENQA, ESG*

Introduction

Education needs to efficiently and extensively transmit that knowledge and information adapted to the new civilization of globalization that does not overwhelm but contribute to the development of people at individual and community level.

In recent years, university education has had to solve particular problems in a global society and for a global society. There is more and more talk of its status as a new education in a set of new types of education (intercultural education, peace education, education for democracy, ecological education). Education for a global society can be considered as a coherent and harmonized ensemble of these "new educations" with a major impact on the formation of the international dimension of man, namely a real availability to understand and support his fellow man, regardless of geographic space , Ethnically, religiously, economically in which he lives.

In this respect, the fundamental pillars of education: "learning to learn", "learning to do", "learning the rules of cohabitation" and "learning to be" receive new formative content and impose new teaching-learning-evaluation strategies. The future of education seems to be directed towards a different performance oriented towards stakeholder satisfaction with sustainable development / corporate (societal) models [1, p.700], [2, p.298], [11, p. 129].

One of the higher education policies, formulated by the European Commission, refers to its quality and relevance. High quality education allows students to acquire the transferable skills and competences needed to adapt after graduation, to the rapid development of the labour market.

The European Student Union (ESU) adopts a strategic policy framework with long-term objectives to ensure that the organization is working towards a defined direction. Although the student lifecycle is relatively short, it is important for ESU to set long-reaching specific strategic objectives which inform work plans by determining what outputs are required to achieve these goals on an annual basis [14].

Higher education institutions have a moral obligation to carry out quality didactic activities within study programs. Ensuring regular internal or external evaluations performs an objective mirror of quality. They place particular emphasis on students' assessments as well as on free discussions with students and graduates to obtain objective feedback on reality [12].

Universities, quality management specialists, non-governmental organizations, European organizations are increasingly talking about quality and quality assurance in higher education.

1. Aspects Referring to Quality in Higher Education

Higher education plays an essential role in perfecting quality education. "A university with a culture of quality can be defined as an organization that has clear values and beliefs that promote total behaviour in favour of quality." [5]

The definition of quality in higher education cannot be achieved without identifying the main defining aspects of quality in general. According to Sallis [10], "quality is the one that differentiates things superficially made from those made in accordance with the principles of excellence."

Karapetrovic and Willborn [4, p.287] defined quality of education as "the ability of student knowledge to satisfy stated requirements" - these requirements are set by employers, accrediting bodies, professional societies, etc. However, the diverse product / service mix that a university provides to internal and external 'customers' requires a broader definition.

The main features of the quality concept and quality dimension have been studied by those we consider to be founders of the field: Philip Crosby, Joseph Juran, Edwards Deming, Armand Feigenbaum and Kaoru Ishikawa. By applying these characteristics to higher education, we come to the quality approach in terms of customer satisfaction seen by Crosby as proof of maturity, Juran links service satisfaction, while Deming defines the main pioneers, the clients, these being the ones that lead to a quality services. Feigenbaum and Ishikava are fully in agreement that only customer orientation leads to total quality control and, implicitly, satisfaction.

Owlia and Aspinwall [8] proposed six quality dimensions in higher education. The six quality dimensions in higher education proposed are: Tangibles; Competence; Attitude; Content; Delivery; And Reliability. (Table 1)

Table no. 1 Quality Dimensions in Higher Education

Dimension	Characteristics
Tangible	Sufficient equipment/facilities Modern equipment/facilities Ease of access Visually appealing environment. Support services (accommodation, sports…)
Competence	Sufficient (academic) staff. Theoretical knowledge, qualification. Practical knowledge. Up to date. Teaching expertise, communication
Attitude	Understanding students' needs Willingness to help Availability of guidance and counselling Giving personal attention Emotional courtesy
Content	Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs of students Effectiveness Containing primary knowledge/skills Completeness, use of computers Communication skills and team working Flexibility of knowledge, being cross-disciplinary
Delivery	Effective presentation Sequencing, timeliness Consistency, fairness of examination Feedback from students Encouraging students.
Reliability	Trustworthiness Giving valid award Keeping promises, match to the goals Handling complaints, solving problems.

Quality assurance should have multiple purposes. Primarily among them is the enhancement of quality in the learning-process, including study programmes, learning opportunities and facilities available for students; creating and promoting a quality culture within higher education institutions; staff development; increasing mutual trust between actors in higher education; enabling reciprocal recognition; facilitating comparability of qualifications and addressing the aspect of social dimension of higher education. Moreover, as a logical consequence of institutional autonomy and the notion of higher education as a public responsibility, quality assurance should also intend to hold higher education institutions accountable. At the same time it should provide relevant information about their activities and performance to students, external stakeholders and society at large.

2. Quality Assurance within the European Higher Education Space

Quality assurance is one of the main missions of higher education institutions. Since 2000, the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy have been the engines for educational reforms across Europe. The development of institutional quality management is the key element of the reform of higher education in Europe. Universities have, from this point of view, the responsibility to ensure the quality of teaching processes, the quality of research and the processes of internal organization.

Quality, not an easily defined concept, is mainly the result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment. Quality assurance should provide a learning environment in which the content of the programs, learning opportunities and facilities are appropriate for the purpose.

The two closely related objectives, improvement and accountability are at the heart of all quality assurance activities. Taken as a whole, they lead to confidence in the performance of the higher education institution. A well-implemented quality assurance system will provide information to both the higher education institution and the general public about the quality of its activities (responsibility) and advice and recommendations for development (improvement). Quality assurance and quality development are thus closely linked. They can support the development of a culture of quality assumed by all involved: from students and teachers to the management and management of the institution.

Quality assurance is addressed to improve quality. It therefore means *all the systematic, preventive and corrective actions needed to meet the student's (implicit and explicit) quality of the needs and to gain confidence.*

The specific and most commonly used quality assurance procedures in higher education refer to: *assessment, accreditation and ranking, the most well-known instrument being assessment.*

Quality assurance depends on *quality culture.* "People create quality, not cars," and "quality begins with education and ends with education." [6] "If we analyse the main organizational values that are currently being promoted in a university we see a welcome change by considering the culture of the organization as a construction Without frontiers, including the views of stakeholders." [9, p.105]

Professor Nica Panaite [7], analysing in 2014 the *main organizational values* promoted at "Al.I.Cuza" University of Iasi, shows that the teaching staff considers among the five main values: *quality, competence, tradition, responsible attitude, compliance with regulations and procedures*, while the students consider the first five values*: quality, competition, competence, accessibility, responsible attitude.*

3. Students' Role in Assuring Quality

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) defines the status of students as clients for quality assessment. An ENQA Report states that "student participation in quality assurance activities is essential as the interests of students as well as employers and society is generally essential in quality-oriented higher education" [13].

Students should be considered as full-quality participants in quality assurance, not only because they are able to assess their educational institution, but especially because they are the ones for whom the teaching process was developed / dedicated that they are the final beneficiaries of educational services.

Students should be able to intervene in identifying, analysing, and resolving issues by understanding that they can clearly help that their involvement is essential and brings many benefits to the quality assurance implementation process. The perception of the importance of students' role in quality assurance and decision-making levels is based on respect for the position of university students. Motivating students' contribution to quality assurance can be seen as follows:

- *Students as partners*. The learning process must be based on close cooperation between teachers and students. The basic premise of learning involves the concept of partnership between the two protagonists of the teaching / learning binom;
- *Students as experts*. The quality of education depends on the quality of learning, students' acceptance of information and their learning / learning satisfaction during their studies, but also later on, university education and not only are evaluated by former students;

- *Students as information providers* (database makers). Note the students' opinion, comments / proposals, satisfaction / dissatisfaction with educational services means for the educational institution a safe way to improve quality;
- *Students as actors* in the self-evaluation process. Students can be more than data providers. They can contribute, together with teachers, to setting up activities / measures, questions of questionnaires, analyses, etc.

Students contribute through their active presence and skills through the communication and evaluation of quality assurance objectives through actions such as:
- *Reporting problems* in the bodies they are represented in;
- *Focus on causes*. Students can examine the origins of the causes and use the results of their analysis to improve the quality of learning;
- *Evaluation / self-evaluation* of Quality Assurance in the university (faculty, specialization).

All this implies that, before any evaluation starts, all stakeholders, including students, must know what has already been done in the educational institution and what is available and usable. Student experience is critical to quality debates. In many cases, questionnaires are used to assess the quality of the students, but these evaluation questionnaires should not be considered as the only way to involve students in quality assurance.

In some cases, students have some communication problems within the higher education institution or their opinion on the quality of learning is not explicitly required or less experienced. Often, for organizational reasons, students have some difficulty in going directly to the teachers responsible for the learning process or quality management. Of course, students should consider the structural form of these representations so that they can become fully involved in the quality assurance process.

A major problem for students may be ignorance of their rights as to the importance of their contribution to quality assurance. Synthesizing, we can consider it essential for the students' contribution to quality assurance:
- Organization and Representation;
- Knowledge / experience;
- Involvement;
- Communication;
- Responsibility.

Advantages for students can be:
- Facilitate their integration in academic programs;
- Involvement in quality management practices;
- Increasing the value of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

ESU will work to improve the quality of higher education for a diverse student population, characterized by removing all obstacles to access and facilitating the progress and completion of a student-centred approach to learning and fairly evaluating students. [14]

4. Standards and Directions for Assuring Quality within the Higher Education European Space

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area (SEIS) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 on the basis of a proposal prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in cooperation with the European Student Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education EURASHE) and the European Universities Association (EUA).

Since 2005, there has been considerable progress in terms of quality assurance and other Bologna Process lines such as the qualifications framework, recognition and promotion of learning outcomes, all of which contribute to a paradigm shift from centred learning and teaching to learning and teaching per student.

In 2015, these Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were revised and approved by the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan.

ESG focuses on internal and external quality assurance with regard to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and the relevant links with research and innovation [15].

According to ESG, a key objective of these standards is to contribute to a common understanding, beyond any frontiers and by all stakeholders, of quality assurance in terms of learning and teaching. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the national and institutional development of quality assurance systems within the European Higher Education Area and in cross-border cooperation.˝

The role of quality assurance is crucial in supporting higher education systems and institutions in adapting to these changes, while ensuring that students acquire qualifications and their experience in higher education remain at the forefront of institutional missions.

The term "quality assurance" is used in this document to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (activities to ensure and improve quality).

The general framework for quality assurance in higher education based on the ENQA principles is based on three sections:
- Internal quality assurance and assessment;
- External quality assurance and evaluation;
- Assurance of quality assessment criteria through external evaluation agencies.

Expectations in the European Higher Education Area (EEES) on quality assurance are increasing:
- assuming and demonstrating responsibility for quality assurance;
- to respect and protect the company's interest in value and quality through standards;
- ensuring the quality of academic programs that need to be continuously developed and improved;
- the existence of efficient organizational structures for evaluation and self-evaluation;
- transparency and use of external expertise in quality assurance processes;
- encouraging and developing a "culture of quality" within the institutions;
- quality assurance for institutional development and performance;
- institutions must be able to demonstrate quality "at home" and at international level;
- the processes used must pursue diversity and innovation.

Although many institutions have established formal quality assurance structures and have adequate documentation and have also introduced an assessment / self-assessment system by the students, there are few published results and transparency at national or institutional level in terms of the quality assurance process. Increasing transparency not only helps public opinion but also motivates students and staff in the institution to establish a responsible and proactive approach to quality improvement.

The Romanian Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), registered in the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EQAR), operates in Romania.

Conclusions

Higher education cannot afford to ignore the concept of quality. The ultimate goal of quality assurance within universities is to develop an internal culture of quality. This culture must be based on the understanding of education as a common system for all stakeholders in higher education and on values such as:
1. Experience in Quality Assurance;
2. The need for transparency / visibility, which makes it possible to access all relevant information for all stakeholders;
3. Highlighting the core values of openness, communication honesty;
4. Interest on the part of everyone: institution, teachers, students, administrative staff working together as partners.

Faced with new challenges, universities, as stakeholders, need total quality management and actions to validate quality and value, and to maintain / enhance the image of the institution.

A quality assurance system is necessary for any academic institution to prove internally and externally that there are conditions for students to meet the standards set by the institution.

Both internal (self-evaluation) and external (certification / accreditation) assessment mechanisms allow identifying strengths and weaknesses in higher education systems. Student assessment is a strategic indicator that plays an important role in classifying and evaluating higher education institutions in many countries.

Helms and Key [3] noted that students could be classified as raw material, customer, or even as employees. As a raw material, students move through a process and become the end product.

It is important to know the students' perception of the different aspects of the internal / external evaluation process: the general perception of the effectiveness of the evaluation process and their perception of the parties before and after the visit, teamwork when writing the report, the attitude of the university vis-à-vis the concept of quality assurance, etc.

Students provide meaningful, constructive and valuable feedback on the quality assessment process that can be used to increase institutional quality.

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