QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

VOLUME II PART 2

Lifelong
Learning
Programme

QUEST

QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

IMPRINT

QUEST FOR QUALITY FOR STUDENTS

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1   FOREWORD

Blazhe Todorovski
Member of the Executive Committee of European Students' Union 2013–14

Quality assurance has been at the core in constructing the European Higher Education Area since the very beginning of the building process. It serves as a tool for trust, enhancing compatibility of degrees across Europe, increasing academic mobility and fostering a sense of belonging to a community. As a result, the cooperation among European nations in the field of quality assurance has increased in recent years.

The modernisation agenda of the European Union notes that quality assurance is a powerful tool for reaching institutional changes. However, there is still work to be done. A significant area in quality assurance that still requires further development is the involvement of students. This area is often neglected, as students are rarely asked about their views on the quality of higher education, especially in relation to any reforms in that field.

The three-year project called Quest for Quality for Students, or QUEST for short, examines these developments from the students' point of view. The QUEST research project was officially launched in 2010 by the European Students Union (ESU)[1] with financial support from the European Commission. QUEST aims to identify students' genuine perception of what quality higher education means from a pan-European perspective with the aim of developing a concept for quality that corresponds to the learner-centred high quality model of higher education for students in Europe. The main innovation of the project stems from its scope: being a pan-European survey of students' opinions, the outcomes will hopefully influence the perceptions of policy-makers and contribute to the construction of a common European Higher Education Area. The three year project will be brought to a conclusion in 2013.

The idea of a student-based quality concept will hopefully bring about change in the field of quality assurance in higher education by widening the current discussion and developing information provision surrounding quality assurance. In engaging in developing this concept, ESU aims to promote new knowledge, new modes of information and new tools that enhance student participation and evidence-based policy making processes in quality assurance in European higher education.

[1]   ESU—The European Students' Union—is the umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students from 39 countries, and through these members represents over 11 million students. 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 was formerly known as ESIB—The National Unions of Students in Europe. *http://www.esu-online.org*

The European Students' Union would like to thank the following partners of the QUEST project for their contribution:

2   INTRODUCTION

This publication is the second part of Volume II of the project called QUEST for Quality for Students, or QUEST for short, run by the European Students' Union. It follows-up on the research work that has been completed in the last three years, the results of which are presented in Volume I and the first part of Volume II.

Volume I, *Quest for Quality for Students: Going Back to Basics*, contains the outcomes of a desk research that examined existing trends in student engagement in quality assurance. It portrays how student participation in quality assurance has increased since the beginning of the Bologna process, especially since the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education were adopted in 2005. However, it also identifies various obstacles that students face in relation to their involvement in quality assurance, including the general challenge of empowering quality assurance that leads to a real change.

The second publication, *Quest for Quality for Students: Survey on Students' Perspectives*, consists of the analysis and findings of an electronically distributed survey, which was answered by eight thousand participants in several European countries. By analysing the responses based on pre-determined, theory-based classifications of quality, the research investigates students' perceptions of quality, how participation in quality assurance enhances quality in students' eyes and students' need for information in relation to what they perceive as being quality education and how this all fits into current discussion. The results provide several points of departure for further research and indicate that the comparative approach is a road worth taking in studying quality related issues in European higher education.

This second part of Volume II outlines the main conceptual and political developments from key institutional viewpoints to broader stakeholder perspectives on quality assurance. It looks more closely at how students form and conceptualise quality and student participation and how these perceptions affect the overall discussion on quality assurance in higher education in Europe. The premise is that results can be used to develop and enhance the involvement of students in quality assurance processes at institutional, national and European levels.

This publication presents a bulk of the in-depth qualitative research conducted during the QUEST project. Approximately fifteen institutional site visits and around fifty interview sessions with student focus groups, student representatives and university staff and management, were conducted in five different European countries. The main topics of discussion were perceptions on quality, quality assurance in higher education and student participation. The site visits were conducted in collaboration with local student communities with a representative from the QUEST project helping to coordinate the interview processes. In addition, broader stakeholder perceptions on ongoing developments in quality and quality assurance in higher education were

collected at a stakeholder conference held in Malta in 2012. Key stakeholders of representative bodies in higher education in Europe were present at the conference.

In the publication, the results of the stakeholder conference are presented in the form of a report called *Where are we now and where are we heading? General report on a stakeholders' consultation conference in Malta 30 Nov–1 Dec 2012*. The following chapter, named *Pan-European case study: Conceptualising student perspectives on quality and quality assurance in higher education in Europe*, presents the findings of the institutional site visits. The data collected during the institutional site visits was analysed using the grounded theory approach, which investigates meanings and concepts as used by social actors in their real settings. Through this method, it was possible to identify the common threads and visible frameworks from the inductive analysis.

A model for pursuing quality emerges from the institutional site-visit data, which transcends simply by listing attributes of quality in higher education as they are perceived by students. Focusing on the wider student-based perspective, this model views quality as a process centred on students' expectations and how they are met. This process, or set of processes, incorporates not only the attributes associated with quality, but also the basic elements of quality. These elements, or principles and values necessary in building quality in higher education, are trust, participation and ownership. It was found that these elements are interlinked, forming a progressive process from trust to partnership all the way to ownership, which is integral to the successful implementation of quality assurance activities and quality culture. The findings of this study give a new insight into students' perceptions on quality and patterns relating to student participation in quality assurance in a pan-European context.

The main findings of this publication have been compiled at the end in order to enhance its usability for readers, identifying key development areas for enhancing student participation and quality assurance in higher education in Europe in general.

3 WHERE ARE WE NOW AND WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

General report on a stakeholders' consultation conference in Valletta, Malta, 30 Nov–1 Dec 2012

Student participation in quality assurance (QA) has been one of the key issues in the Bologna Process, but also one of the success stories of student participation in general. The European Students' Union (ESU) has been actively involved in advocating student participation in quality assurance processes. ESU has, among other things, shared and provided its expertise in internal, and external quality assurance processes, in accreditation or evaluation bodies, and in the work of national and international quality assurance agencies.

Quality assurance in the European context has developed significantly in the past decade or so. In 2000, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, now the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) was established. A year later, the Prague Communiqué of the European education ministers acknowledges quality as a major factor in determining the competitiveness and attractiveness of higher education in Europe.

Only a few years later, formal quality assurance processes are set out as an action line of the Bologna process[1] in the Bologna treaty with the Berlin Communiqué of 2003. The main stakeholder groups at the European level, the so-called "E4" (ENQA, ESU, the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Higher Education Institutes (EURASHE) were invited to devise a common framework for quality and quality assurance in higher education. The collaboration's end product was the establishment of common standards and procedures for quality assurance.

With the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted. The ownership of the ESG was not only shared by the founding bodies of the ESG, but also by the European states that were committed to the Bologna Process. The ESG applied to internal quality assurance systems for higher education institutions as well as external quality assurance procedures and systems.

Two years later, the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR) was established in order to increase transparency in quality assurance in Eu-

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1 There were other notable initiatives before the Bologna Process (1999), notably *Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP, 1993)* that was launched by the *Association of European Universities (CRE)*, nowadays European University Association (EUA) and *European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education (1994)*

rope. EQAR's main tasks included publishing and managing a list of quality assurance agencies (QAAs), which are seen to substantially comply with the ESG's.

Today, seven years after the onset of the ESG, the ESG are undergoing revision. After a report was put together by the E4, the representatives of the signatory countries of the Bologna process decided to update the ESG. The aim of that revision is to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, and scope. The revision will be based on an initial proposal prepared by the E4 in cooperation with Education International, BusinessEurope and EQAR. The proposal will be submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group[2].

A consultation conference organised with stakeholders in Malta from 30 November to 1 December 2012 had its place within these developments. By disseminating the outcomes and aims of the project at the conference, the spotlight was directed at core issues for students among other stakeholders that were put up for a general discussion. These issues included the relationships between quality assurance processes at different levels and in different contexts (internal, institutional, external, external reviews of quality assurance agencies), the visibility of the outcomes of quality assurance activities and involvement of stakeholders (with special focus on the role of students). The conference also discussed possible scenarios for the future in quality assurance in higher education in Europe.

This chapter covers the general discussion taking place at that conference and analyses students' opinions and participation in quality assurance in relation to stakeholders' views.

3.1   STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

The topic of stakeholder participation in quality assurance was raised in various sessions during the conference, focusing on this particular subject. A general conclusion of these sessions was that, irrespective of the level reached in quality assurance, all stakeholders in European universities (academic and administrative staff, researchers, students) must participate in institutional affairs. The participants agreed that students are—or should be—full, or equal, members of the academic community. Students should be involved because they have a duty or responsibility to do so, not because they are customers of the higher education system.

The participants had the chance to exchange experiences and good practices of students' involvement in quality assurance in working group sessions. Overall, it seemed that student participation in quality assurance was a success story within the European Higher Education Area. However, there were still many areas that needed to be improved and issues that needed to be addressed in order to ensure an effective and

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2   Bucharest Communiqué 2012

genuine student participation in quality assurance processes. For example, student participation in profession-oriented or study-field specific accreditation was considered to be very limited in many parts of Europe

Another important question that was addressed at the conference was how genuine student participation in quality assurance should be differentiated from formal participation. In a number of cases, students are only involved "on paper", meaning that the formal or bureaucratic prerequisites are in place but students are not actively engaged in the process, for whatever reason there may be. This kind of a token presence is not sufficient to ensure student participation. Other insufficiencies were highlighted at the institutional level (where the core of quality is), such as how quality assurance was presented to students and made relevant to them.

The transparency of quality assurance procedures was a key challenge mentioned during the session. This was considered to be an important element because students' motivation for participating in quality assurance and development activities could be enhanced only if the activities for quality assurance and procedures would be effective and visible.

Stakeholders at the European level strongly agreed that students' role as partners in quality assurance and in the life of higher educational institutions in general was not only beneficial but also necessary. However, a few inherent limitations to student participation were identified. One of the main challenges was believed to be the short life-cycle or study-cycle of students. An average study period of about three to five years was considered to be a time period which would be very difficult for developing a genuine knowledge of and a "feel" for a particular university. Changes in higher educational institutions, on the other hand, occur very slowly, especially in older and larger universities.

Related to this, the participants mentioned the fact that the results or outcomes of quality assurance exercises were usually not visible to students within a short timeframe. This was also linked to one of the topics of this conference: the impact of quality assurance through visibility. If students provided feedback on a course or the work of a teacher (e.g. in a feedback meeting), and the feedback resulted in changes made by academic staff, the participating students would need to be made aware of the changes they initiated and that their input was valued.

Despite the challenges, it could be said that much has been achieved over the past years in enhancing student participation in quality assurance. Indeed, student participation has to be seen as a continuous process. (Here, it must be remembered that the degree of success in achieving student participation varies across the European Higher Education Area. Differences stem not only from the development stage of national and institutional quality assurance systems but also from historical, political and cultural differences.)

The discussion point of how the outcomes of quality assurance can be made visible and accessible to all the direct stakeholders was returned to on several occasions during the conference. However, it was stressed that outcomes also need to be made

visible to the wider public. The latest development in higher education in Europe and quality assurance policies has showed that reports have become increasingly available and visible (external review exercises, self-evaluation reports and even internal evaluations in some cases). More needs to be done in that area in order to make the reports and outcomes of quality assurance processes truly accessible to the stakeholders, not only the formal provisions.

The concept of "cognitive accessibility" was mentioned in relation to visibility. Cognitive accessibility supports the idea of putting the outcomes of quality assurance (reports, for example) in a plain and conceivable form in order to facilitate understanding in the society at large and among the stakeholders themselves.

The tricky nature of terminology and jargons also raised discussions on how quality assurance can sometimes be detached from daily life at higher educational institutions. Neither students nor staff may realise that they are in fact actively dealing with a process related to quality assurance on a day-to-day basis, for example in the process of designing and developing curricula which is a part of the quality assurance. The understanding of quality assurance needs very much to be changed, to move away from the notion of it being purely a bureaucratic process.

Last but not least, an important remark was raised during this session about students' readiness to participate in quality assurance processes and the need for an appropriate training in issues related to quality assurance. It was considered to be important that students themselves advance the idea of an active student engagement, train other students and make quality assurance activities an interesting and an appealing part of university life.

3.2 DIFFERENT VIEWS ON QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Based on the assumption that stakeholders have diverse perceptions and expectations towards higher education institutions, they will also hold very different views of what quality in education is and how it should be boosted and maintained[3].

Stefan Delplace, as General Secretary of EURASHE, a representative entity for professionally oriented programs, applied and profession-related researches, was of the view that it was important for us to ask ourselves what purpose higher education serves. Is it for personal development, professional enhancement, discipline-oriented teaching, or employability? In effect, a student who graduates from any type of education must be employable, but we must also remember that this concept does not mean the same thing as employment. Employment refers to the process when you prepare someone for a job. Employability, on the other hand, implies life-long skill-sets required for developing a career. He also reminded us that not all changes were for

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3   More on different perspectives on QA in the QUEST research publications

the better. We were now undergoing an economic crisis, which affected employment. However, this type of a general economic influence over education and employment or employability-driven education were not permanent trends per se.

Achim Hopbach, President of the ENQA, believed that things had changed tremendously in the last years and that it was easy to track those areas where quality assurance had an impact. However, it was very difficult to measure this aspect and not even sure if it should be done. For instance, external quality assurance is one of the major new steering mechanisms in higher education and, together with other mechanisms, it does clearly have an impact. What kind of an impact is, on the other hand, difficult to pinpoint exactly.

Tia Loukkola, head of Quality Management and Institutional Evaluation Programme unit of the EUA, brought the perspective of universities into the discussion, arguing that there was a relationship between quality and quality assurance, but it was hard to demonstrate. Quality assurance procedures would not assure quality alone, but they were able to detect it. Too many regulations on the learning process might lead to less innovation, which was too, a part of quality education. Hence, quality assurance had the potential of promoting quality, but this would not happen without changes in attitudes and behaviours at the individual level. When asked if quality assurance had become a great bureaucratic burden for the universities, Loukkola reminded that bureaucratic tendencies tend to lie at both ends. At EUA, they would like to see more institutional accreditation rather than more regulatory programme accreditation.

It was mentioned during the session that students had a uniquely intrinsic motivation for getting involved in quality assurance. The improvement of students' study programmes and universities in general was, as such, also the improvement of their own education. For the students, it was considered to be especially important to focus on the quality of teaching outcomes and on providing a good environment for the teaching and learning process.

Finally, an important point was raised in the discussion about quality culture. We will always have quality culture, but it can be good or bad. Fruitful quality culture requires engagement, shared responsibility among the actors in the higher education community and procedures that facilitate these goals. It is not good to leave or restrict work in quality enhancement and quality assurance to a single operational unit.

3.3   QUALITY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS: WHERE DOES THE LOOP CLOSE?

The link between external and internal quality assurance

Throughout the conference, reflections and discussions on how external quality assurance could trickle down to the institutional level and advance a quality culture where strong and meaningful student participation is present and where learning itself would be more student-centred, were carried out.

One of the main remarks made by the participants was that external quality assurance should complement internal quality assurance. The final goal would be to establish a working, overarching quality system where everyone would be committed to producing and maintaining a quality culture. External quality assurance should only be a supporting mechanism and not a strict instrument of control.

External quality assurance provisions would have to respond if internal (institutional) processes are lacking, but they should not, and cannot, replace the the internal ones. Instead, the external mechanism for quality assurance should foster the idea that institutions are responsible for their own quality and that it should guide higher educational institutions to ensure the fitness of purpose of the education they provide and for them to be(come) fit for their purpose. In some cases even now, agencies did not act as the 'judge and jury' but as a helping hand, enabling development and encouraging collaboration. This should be a widespread practice.

The periodicity of the external reviews was another point tackled by the participants. Because the majority of national regulations prescribed a five-year cycle, the participants believed that there was a time-gap in the system which hindered a continuous engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes. The same thing was valid in the cases of reporting. It was common for universities to prepare reports exclusively for and before an external review took place.

The participants also discussed how external and internal processes for quality assurance were linked in the minds of people working within these systems. Sometimes those actors would get so caught up in external reviews that they would forget to sit down and think about what quality assurance means at the grass-root level, in other words, what it means for students, teachers and other stakeholders.

In conclusion, despite the external review philosophy being based on the continuity of the quality assurance process, that does not really happen in practise. Many of the activities are ongoing but peak around and during reviews. The time in between is not as active. Ongoing follow-up and development should, in most instances, be initiated at the management level of the university and in collaboration with stakeholders.

3.4 WHAT NEXT? ABOUT THE ESG REVISION, RANKINGS AND STUDENTS PURSUING QUALITY EDUCATION

There are at least three crucial points that need to be raised when it comes to the future development of quality assurance policies at the European level.

Firstly, discussions on the practical utility of the ESG were carried out with the Map ESG Project[4] and the conclusions of the Bucharest Ministerial Conference of the Bologna process in 2012. The participants of the QUEST conference in Malta agreed that the ESG define the generic principles in quality assurance but not procedures, as was expected originally by some stakeholders. The ESG prescribed what institutions should do, but not how. Thus, it relied on the core principles, of: institutional responsibilities for quality assurance; the fitness for purpose of external quality assurance (there is still a variety of approaches of external quality assurance used at the European level); stakeholder participation; and context sensitivity (not a one-size-fits-all approach). There are huge differences in national quality assurance systems (from programme and institutional evaluations, to accreditations and audits) and also a great autonomy in establishing internal systems for quality assurance.

In terms of transparency in quality assurance, the main issues discussed concerned who, when and for what purpose the resulting public information was supposed to serve. Stakeholders' definitions of quality and transparency varied: different stakeholders had different demands. In conclusion, it would not be sufficient to apply a single tool for transparency in higher education.

Currently, there are several different university and higher education rankings taking the world by storm. At the Malta conference, the existing rankings were criticised for having unspecified target groups and for ignoring the diversity within institutions. Also, those rankings work with a narrow range of dimensions, like traditional research and reputation, without due consideration towards diversity among institutions. Another highly problematic issue with rankings is the composition of the overall indicators used. Those indicators make the results understandable but difficult to formulate in a credible manner, if tied to unspecified and potentially volatile methodology. Lastly, there was also a question raised about the possible bias within the scientific field and by region and language in citation databases.

The ongoing U-Map[5] project is a reaction to the more or less mono-dimensional global university rankings. This mapping project, supported by the European Commission, is based on empirical data and informed by multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional perspectives. It is to be user-driven, non-hierarchical, applicable to all higher educational institutions in Europe, based on reliable and verifiable data and parsimonious regarding collecting extra data. All those details still have to be ad-

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4   See more at: *http://mapesg.wordpress.com/*

5   *http://www.u-map.eu/*

dressed. The implementation had not yet reached its final stage when the conference in Malta was held.

As mentioned in previous section, it was emphasised at numerous occasions that top-down inflicted changes in policies do not necessarily lead to changes of mind-set, and hence changes in quality culture in institutions. Thus, it is imperative for all stakeholders to actively participate and contribute to developments activities higher educational institutions.

When it comes to students' involvement and the participation of students in quality assurance, it is already defined by the ESG at institutional level, external reviews and in quality assurance governance. Still, it must be remembered that there is a marked difference between formal and active involvement of students in quality assurance. Thus, the recognition of students as full and active stakeholders in quality assurance processes will remain to be an issue.

Students all over Europe should become active and informed and get involved in quality assurance. Students should not let their guard down if they are currently outside those processes, but instead actively push it onto the agenda. For instance, the EUA-IEP (Institutional Evaluation Programme) had a very heated debate at the European level about whether to introduce students in review panels or not. Today, however, students have been included and there is a general agreement on the fact that students have had a positive impact. This is, of course, not the only concrete example of success in this area. Indeed, students should use all available (and contextually relevant) examples when making their case of including students in quality assurance activities and bodies at the institutional level.

Finally, an increasingly important point to make is that students, especially at the grass-root level, should not adapt to the consumer model for higher education. It is extremely hard for students to engage as equal partners if the students assume or are assumed to have a consumer role in education. Students should, instead, continue to believe that they have an impact on their study processes. There are, at the moment, too few students concerned with quality assurance issues. Students should embrace their status as the heart of the process. National unions of students and equivalent bodies should engage in discussion about their own aims and tools in quality assurance and engage in a broader discussion with other stakeholders.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THIS SECTION:

- National policies and legislative frameworks are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure student participation in quality assurance;

- External mechanisms for quality assurance should foster the idea that institutions are responsible for their own quality;

- 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;

- There is a strong need to move away from the notion that quality assurance is purely a bureaucratic process;

- Despite the external review philosophy being based on the continuity of the quality assurance process, this does not really happen in practise;

- Quality assurance procedures will not assure quality alone, but they are able to detect it. Too many regulations on the learning process might result in less innovation, which is too, a part of quality education;

- A single tool for transparency in higher education is not sufficient;

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

- Students have responsibilities as stakeholders and as partners;

- Students' motivation for participating in quality assurance and development activities can be enhanced only if the quality assurance activities and procedures are effective and made visible;

- If students provide feedback, they need to be made aware of the changes they have initiated and that their input was valued;

- It is important that students advance the idea of an active student engagement, train other students and make quality assurance activities an interesting and appealing part of university life;

- The impact of quality assurance activities often comes with a delay;

- Rankings can be an instrument for providing transparency, but it is very difficult to encompass the quality dimension of education.

4   PAN-EUROPEAN CASE STUDY

Conceptualising students' perspectives on quality and quality assurance in higher education in Europe.

When the European Students' Union launched its project, Quest for Quality for Students (QUEST), it embarked on an ambitious and important adventure. By mixing research, practice and capacity-building activities, QUEST seeks to identify students' genuine perceptions of what quality higher education means from a pan-European perspective. It provides the European Students' Union with a chance to define a student-based concept of quality in higher education that centres on the learner. This idea of developing a student-based concept for quality can potentially bring about changes in the field of quality development in European higher education. It can help widen the discussion surrounding quality assurance and improve the information provided by higher education institutions to better reflect the views of students as the main stakeholders in higher education. The main innovation of the project lies in its scope, a pan-European survey of students' opinions.

Institutional site visits were one of the qualitative elements used in the research study. Around fifty interviews and/or focus groups were organised with students, student representatives as well as university management and staff in five European countries. The purpose of these sessions was to examine the students' perceptions on quality, quality assurance and student participation in these areas more closely. The interviews were conducted in teams and in collaboration with local student representatives from different countries.

The data that was collected during the institutional site visits, such as field notes and reports, was examined by using the grounded theory approach, which looks into the interpretative processes taking place by investigating the meanings and concepts used by social actors in their real settings. The aim was to find actor-based conceptualisations of quality, quality assurance and the processes related to them.

The findings of this study give new insight into students' perceptions on quality and patterns relating to student participation in quality assurance in a pan-European context. Despite the multi-cultural interface of this project and the different languages used in the collection of the data, it was possible to identify the common threads and visible frameworks from the inductive analysis. A model for pursuing quality emerges from the institutional site-visit data, which transcends listing attributes of quality in higher education as they are perceived by students. Focusing on the wider student-based perspective, this model views quality as a process centred on students' expectations and how they are met. This process, or set of processes, incorporates not only the attributes associated with quality, but also the basic elements of quality. These ele-

ments, or principles and values necessary in building quality in higher education, are trust, participation and ownership.

4.1   METHODS

RESEARCH STRATEGY

The study is designed to reflect the main aims of the QUEST project, which are to:

- ⊙ identify students' genuine perception of what quality higher education means from a pan-European perspective;

- ⊙ define a concept for quality education that corresponds to the learner-centred model for quality higher education for students in Europe;

- ⊙ to bring change in the field of quality higher education by transcending the discussion surrounding quality assurance and information provisions to reflect the views of students as the main benefactors rather than simply as any other actors, and;

- ⊙ be a pan-European survey of student opinion.

This study examines students' participation in quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms/systems/frameworks, the information students are provided with when applying for studies and how this information relates to what they perceive as being "quality education".

The interviews took place from 2012 to 2013 in five different countries: Slovakia, Germany, Romania, Latvia and Spain. The site visits were organised with the help of the local national unions and/or project partners.

The site visits were conducted by a team consisting of two experts, a representative of the European Students' Union (often from the respective country) and a local representative from either the project partner or a local member union. These site visits lasted approximately two to three days and included an interview with a representative of the quality assurance unit (or similar) at the higher education institution, an interview with the student representative in charge of academic affairs and quality, and focus groups of students (Eight to ten people including undergraduates and postgraduates).

The site visits employed the methods of active and passive observation, interviews and student focus group exercises. The interviews centred on four key issues, which were identified on the basis of the previous parts conducted in the QUEST research:

- motivation;

- perceptions on quality;

- awareness of quality assurance mechanisms, and;

- information needs.

The interviews and student focus groups were based on a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. Interviewers and interviewees were encouraged to elaborate and refine their answers if possible. Some interviews were held in local languages. Local representatives could act as translators when necessary and also clarified national contexts when necessary.

The challenges involved in doing this kind of a multicultural and student-led research are considerable. The questions had to be interviewee-friendly in terms of language used but sufficiently open to invite further discussion from among the participants. At the same time, a certain structure was necessary in order to get comparable data. Keeping in mind language and culture barriers, not to mention the scale of the study and the fact that it was carried out in part by students themselves, it can be said that the data collection was a relative success, and also, to a certain extent, groundbreaking.

A report was produced by the site visit coordinator following each visit in cooperation with the other member of the review team. These reports were based on the basis of the input received during the interviews and the focus groups. The basic template was the following:

1 Motivation

2 Perceptions on quality

3 Awareness of quality assurance mechanisms and quality culture

4 Information needs

5 Academic freedom

For more detailed information on site visit, focus group samples and the interview guidelines, please see the Annex of this report.

ANALYSIS—GROUNDED THEORY

Due to the innovative nature of the study and the call from the QUEST-project Research Advisory Board for something new to add to the discussion on quality, considerable thought was put into finding a suitable method for analysing the data. The inductive approach of Grounded Theory (GT) was found to provide a good tool for analysis, the approach potentially providing useful findings in line with this particular QUEST-study. The methodology also seemed suitable in approach considering the nature of the available data and its inherent weaknesses without compromising potentially significant findings.

Grounded theory and its analytical procedure were originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area (Glaser, 1992, p. 16). In other words, it is a research method that focuses on the interpretive process by analysing "the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings" (Gephart in Suddeby 2006, p. 633). The method is used widely by researchers in various fields such as the social sciences, business and education. (Glaser, Suddeby 2006, Isabella 1990).

Grounded theory (GT) does not impose grand theories on data nor does it use hypothesis-testing or falsification as a basis for its study. Instead, it is an organic process whereby theory emerges from the data, based on how well data fits conceptual categories identified by an observer (the researcher), how well categories explain ongoing interpretations and by how relevant the categories are to the core issues being observed. Basically, it offers "a compromise between extreme empiricism and complete relativism by articulating a middleground in which systematic data collection can be used to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors in social settings" (Suddeby 2006, p. 633–634).

The findings of grounded theory should fit contextually into wider discussion and theoretical frameworks. As such, grounded theory is perhaps more appropriate for some questions than others. It is, however, highly suitable to efforts to understand processes, such as in this study, by which actors construct the meaning of an intersubjective experience. (Suddeby, 2006, p. 633–634).

In practice, grounded theory consists of six main phases: open or substantive coding, identification of core categories, selective coding, emergence of theory, testing fit of theory, and discussion (Glaser 1978). The practice of memoing (taking notes in an orderly fashion) takes place throughout the study.

All data provided in this study was initially coded open by adding a second column next to the data text for the purposes of making notes and identifying codes at higher levels of abstraction. Coding is essentially digesting and labelling the data for what it appears to represent. Any initial ideas on emerging core categories, properties, dimensions of properties and how they are all interlinked were jotted down in separate memos on both computer and by hand. The work requires constant comparison

of data against any emerging theory. The coding can also generate in vivo codes, i.e. words, usually verbatim quotes, from participants that are themselves used as a code for the data.

The initial analysis, referring to the initial coding and memos, were then reviewed, and the initial codes refined, and ideas regarding relationships and processes examined. This led to the identification of core categories or core issues and core relationships and processes. In the selective coding process, the data was looked at more selectively and analytically at higher levels of abstraction, identifying any new and refining old codes along the way. This act requires the researcher to interact and engage with the data at an in-depth level. Both open and selective coding took place until saturation occurred. Categories are "saturated" when the analysis of new data generates codes that only fit in existing categories, which are adequately explained in terms of their properties and dimensions.

The emergence of the theory required a separate analytical process where the data and codes were viewed in higher levels of abstraction and in relation to one another. At the end, the fit of the theory was tested against unanalysed existing data.

"Pure" grounded theory-practitioners may draw attention to the wording and structure of the interview guidelines used in this study. To the general audience they may seem quite general, but to a GT-enthusiast they may appear too leading, as grounded theory generally only uses strictly neutral and general questioning (especially the Glaser method). This limitation was taken into account at the beginning of the study. It is acknowledged that the questions asked will have influenced the direction of the discussion to varying extents. However, after weighing in the realities of the data collection process, the relative strengths and limitations of the data and the strengths of using the grounded theory methodology, the pros were thought to outweigh the cons. It is also the researchers' understanding, that the questions were partly built on the data received in the desk survey and desk research of the QUEST project. It could therefore be said that the collaborative theory and data collection started emerging already during the prior stages of the QUEST project. Nevertheless, the grounded theory mantras, such as "all is data", "feel the fear and do it anyway" and "just do it", were also found to be encouraging (Glaser, 1998).

That being said, the study will not result in any conclusive or exhaustive definitions relating to conceptualisations of quality. However, this analysis will certainly bring added value to the QUEST project's quest for quality. Bearing in mind that the prior desk research and survey were largely based on existing theories (e.g. Harvey & Green, Humboldt, consumer-theory), this approach will, in its part, provide a more inductive analysis and theoretical framework for examining the concept of quality and quality assurance practices (ESU 2012, ESU 2013).

COLLECTED DATA

The data used in the data analysis consisted of interview reports and field notes that were provided to the researcher. Unfortunately, it was not possible to acquire, transcribe or translate recordings from each interview session due to technical reasons, time restrictions and availability of resources.

The overall structure, content and language of the reports varied from one country to another. The probable causes for this are the collaborative approach used for collecting data, lack of more specific instructions for producing reports, different levels of research skills within the student-led teams, cultural differences, varying language abilities as well as the use of different languages during the site visits and for reporting. Most reports were very descriptive, but a few initial attempts at analysis were also evident in some of the reports. For the purposes of this study, a few observed attempts at abstraction or deeper level of analysis were discarded from the coding process. Reports included field notes and direct quotations to a varying extent. This was a bonus.

In many forms of qualitative data analysis, the above-mentioned issues can impose serious challenges for a traditional "objective" analysis of the qualitative data (e.g. phenomenology). However, there is reason to believe that the intercultural, collaborative approach and relatively open method of the data collection can also yield substantial insight that is able to transcend cultural boundaries. Due to the high level of local knowledge present, the site visit teams were, in their reports and field notes, able to capture core issues as expressed by students and other stakeholders at grass-root levels in different geographical contexts. Because of their trainings and background in student participation in quality assurance issues up to the European level, the researcher feels that the observations that were made by the interviewers during the site visits may also lead to more substantial findings—findings that can transcend cultural barriers instead of being bound by them. This, of course, is in line with the objectives of this study.

Nevertheless, it is also important that the approach to and methods of data analysis are chosen and formulated carefully to account for both the limitations and the strengths of the data. This is why the grounded theory approach was selected. The researcher in charge of analysis must also be able to engage actively and navigate one's way effectively through the data, which requires some familiarity with the working ground.

All in all, there is general sense of confidence that the data has been analysed comprehensively and that due cultural sensitivity was taken to ensure that significant differences in meanings related to languages and terminologies were circumvented. Of course, the risk is still there though. It would have been useful to have more time to conduct an in-depth engagement with the data in order to come up with a more nuanced and detailed analysis. This, however, is perhaps out of the scope and purpose of this particular study and the available data. There is a clear need for a follow-up and further research on this topic, especially for gathering more in-depth evidence.

4.2 CONCEPTUALISING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

DISCUSSING QUALITY

Expectations versus reality

The student focus groups were asked to identify expectations related to quality issues. Hence, the data includes a fair amount of discussion on the attributes associated with the quality of higher education. A more technical way to look at them is to view them as indicators of quality in higher education. The following list, extricated in the coding processes, provides a summarised and categorised list of these associations with quality that were made by the interviewees. The list can be broken down to core expectations towards the learning process and conditional expectations (that facilitate the realisation of core expectations). Core expectations refer to the direct expectations that students have about their education, while conditional expectations relate to the environment and conditions that are thought to be necessary in realising core expectations.

Core expectations	Conditional expectations
○ Teaching content and learning process	○ Services, facilities and system structures related to studying
○ Teachers have substantial knowledge and expertise	○ Feedback to students on their work and progress
○ Teachers are committed and have pedagogical skills	○ Supervision and student guidance
○ Learning to learn and to structure knowledge	○ Adequate facilities that are fit-for-purpose
○ Learning to respect and work with others	○ System and structures of studies are easy to navigate
○ There is a good balance and mix of research and education	○ Scheduling of teaching and courses
○ University studies are different to secondary school → specialisation and way of learning	○ Transparency
	○ Functioning administration
○ Generic competences are gained	○ Good student services
○ There is a good balance of theory and practice	○ Students are organised and there is a good level of student representation (student unions)
○ There is a progressive curriculum	
○ The curriculum provides students with flexibility in their choices	**Academic environment and culture**
○ The study workload is manageable	○ Accessibility to higher education
○ Internationality	○ Good, motivated student peers (quality student body)
○ There are study exchange opportunities	○ Engaging, interactive academic community
○ Education is recognition abroad	○ The university is committed to develop its teaching
○ There are guest lecturers from abroad	○
○ Employability	
○ Learning to apply knowledge	
○ Contact-building	
○ Learning from practitioners in the field	
○ Internships	
○ Ability to get a good job	

It was mentioned on a number of occasions throughout the data, how expectations are fulfilled, how they live up in reality and how expectations and motivations change. This proved to be a pivotal point in the data and analysis. One of the student focus groups actually came up with its own definition for quality that was based on expectations: "Quality is a measurement for the fulfilling of expectations of a group toward higher education …".

Terms like "expectation" and "fulfilment" and "differing from reality" indicate that the quality of higher education is linked to processes and should be examined within such a context. The analysis therefore led to the core process of *Expectations vs. reality* being identified. The process looks at how students' expectations are met by universi-

ties or, in other words, how the transpiring reality relates to students' expectations of higher education.

Students'
expectations

What transpires
in reality

How the university set
about meeting these
expectations
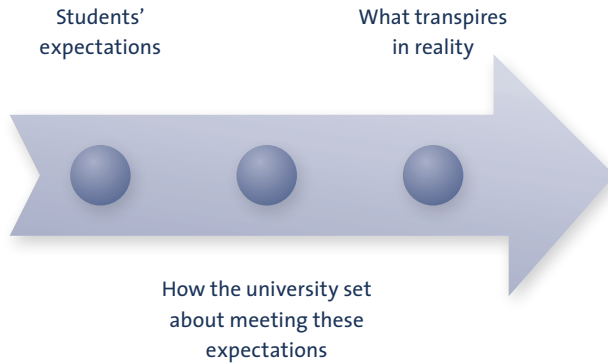
TRUST, PARTICIPATIONS AND OWNERSHIP

During the data analysis, other key categories emerged. Three key underlying themes began to continuously resurface: trust, participation and ownership. Initially they were identified as underlying core categories. However, there seemed to be an inherent link to expectations and the 'expectations versus reality'-process. Not only could expectations be subcategorised as a category of its own under these three themes, but some of them could be linked directly to one or more of the three themes. This led to the analysis of the expectations in relation to the themes of trust, participation and ownership. What was especially interesting to discover, was how the three themes were all interlinked, how they built on themselves and how they all contributed to the expected and lived experiences of quality.

A key issue that students related to the core process of expectations versus reality was the information provided by universities, especially its correspondence with the experienced reality.

"The study differs a lot from the brochures…"

"The study reality was not represented by information material in most cases. Personal references did match [more]…"

This process was related in the data to the theme of trust. The theme was also coded in its negative form distrust, implied also by terms like "disappointment". It usually applied to the core expectations students had from their education (teaching quality, content of teaching, employability issues). For example, there seemed to be apprehension and distrust towards the information provided to applicants by the university, which led to the use of various formal and informal verification processes.

"Students trusted more in the informal paths than in the official offerings [of information provided by the university]".

A key reason for this was that the general information was experienced as being too "short" or "neutral", leading to the used of various verification methods. These included the recommendations of friends and family, discussions with existing students, as well as personally contacting various people at the university.

Student representatives also mentioned how students have been given misleading information regarding the nature and amount of contact teaching. An example of this was how a "three-day intensive course" turned out to be one three-hour lecture and "independent work".

An especially interesting example related to trust, mentioned in the student focus groups, was how studying led to the aspirations of studying changing from reaching good marks (academic merit) to "be[ing] successful at all" (passing), partly due to issues like "bureaucratic hurdles". This is an especially worrisome issue in relation to quality, because students come armed with ambition in reaching academic excellence only to be sidelined by the system and what could be seen as secondary concerns, whereby the motivations and ambitions are lowered. This example also goes to highlight how the information given by universities could be seen to be a key point at which student expectations are generated. Lived experience, on the other hand, can clearly be seen to shape these expectations.

One element that is not discussed in the data is the role of external influences in shaping students' expectations, such as social and cultural influences. Unfortunately, this is outside the scope of the available data. This is, however, an increasingly interesting point for further inquiry and research.

Overall, students appear to put quite a lot of faith in the universities. They trust institutions to meet their core expectations from higher education. Of course, this can be expected. Higher education can have an enormous impact on a person's future. Associating these expectations to be standards of quality (a type of measure of success) is therefore to be expected.

PARTICIPATION

Another key issue identified in the data is the theme of participation. The last example regarding the evolving aspirations of students is also indicative of this theme. It could be thought, that "bureaucreatic hurdles" are in the way of full participation in the processes of higher education. The expectations linked to this theme tend to be the conditional expectations, namely services, facilities and system structures related to studying and academic environment and culture.

Students require systems and structures that enable them to participate fully in the learning processes. Things brought up by students and student representatives include issues related to facilities and equipment (lack of study spaces, lack of lecture halls, the size of teaching spaces, lack of equipment, lack of study materials) and the shortcomings of the study system (excessive workloads, timetabling issues, lack of feedback and constructive evaluation from teachers, worries related to self-sustenance).

At the same time, the academic culture and interaction is thought to be an important part of the studying experience, which also enables learning. Learning to respect different opinions and learning to make arguments was an example of this. Students value learning from each other and expect that fellow students have similar motivations and ambitions from studying. An active, discursive culture was also thought to be important and was expressed by one group as "getting wired ideas". When asked about to mention a valuable learning experience, another student focus group mentioned

> *"having colleagues interested in the same things you are… so [you are in] discussion with your future colleagues."*

Nonetheless, the socio-cultural dimension was also brought up by references as opportunities for students and the academic community to bond during leisure-time, for example sports and culture.

It is worth mentioning here, that the existence of good student representation and student organisations, were also mentioned in the data.

All in all, participation as a core category appears to build on trust. This includes having all the necessary information to partake in educational processes and that the information is reliable and in line with reality.

OWNERSHIP

Of the three themes, ownership was the last to fully emerge. There were many indicators of it in the data. At first they were grouped with the participation theme, but it soon became clear that ownership provided a new dimension altogether, questioning how the processes and concepts related to quality are owned by actors in the field. It first surfaced during the discussion surrounding quality assurance activities and quality culture, but its tentacles were found to reach conceptualisations of quality in general. In a way, it could be seen as an area where quality assurance and quality really collide. This was found to be an interesting observation. Ownership appears to encapsulate both trust and participation, but brings them to a more intensive level: the processes associated with trust and participation, including management of student expectations, are owned by the university community and its internal stakeholders.

Issues mentioned during the interviews include how the groups and people functioning in university environments should strive towards the same goals; that the quality of a module was not dependent on the higher education institution but the teacher (a person); how teachers should not teach because "it's a job" but because of they are committed and "put their soul into it"; that the university as an organisation is dedicated to developing education; and that students should be seen as full partners who participate actively in the development of their education.

Another thing mentioned during the interviews, especially by student representatives, was the implementation of international higher education policies at the local and national levels. A good example of this is the adoption of the degree structure outlined in the Bologna process. In some cases, the studies were restructured with no reference to students' workload and they were not divided appropriately among progressive degrees. This affected the students' workload and was seen to harm the learning process in cases where, for example, a four-year degree was squeezed into three years.

Finally, ownership could be seen as in intrinsic level of motivation in engaging with the processes associated with quality that surpasses mere participation. In as such, it is also reliant on the participation, and, by default, trust.

EMERGENCE OF THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF QUALITY—HOW TRUST, PARTICIPATION AND OWNERSHIP FORM A CORE PROCESS IN QUALITY

Trust, participation and ownership could be seen to be the building blocks of quality in higher education. They provide the integral elements and principles on which quality can be constructed by the people and institutions involved. As was already mentioned, they also build on each other. In as such, their relation to each other seems to indicate a type of progression. This could be seen as the underlying foundation process on which quality lies.

Ownership
- Striving for academic excellence and gaining general competence is a common goal
- Institutional commitment to developing learning and teaching
- The university, the staff and the students take ownership of their respective roles and processes, "put their soul into it"
- Accessibility of higher education
- Applicants have the information and tools to participate in decision-making about higher education
- Student peers are motivated

Participation
- Access to use facilities and learning resources
- There are opportunities to participate in culture and free-time activities
- Students use academic social interaction and discussion in the university community—to be inspired and get "wired ideas"
- University structures and practices are transparent and easy-to-navigate, enabling students to participate fully in their studies
- The student workload and time management enable students to participate effectively in their education
- Students are organised and participate in their learning process as partners at the university

Trust
- Students trust the university to meet their expectations regarding teaching content and learning, as well as services, facilities any system structure
- The university adopts transparency in managing student expectations
- Students are trusted as members in the academic community
- Students trust the university to arrange and resource studies and facilitie so as to enable them to participate

As discussed earlier, this progressive process is heavily connected to expectations and how they transpire in reality. In effect, their dualistic relationship, the sum of the analysis, can be displayed in the following manner:
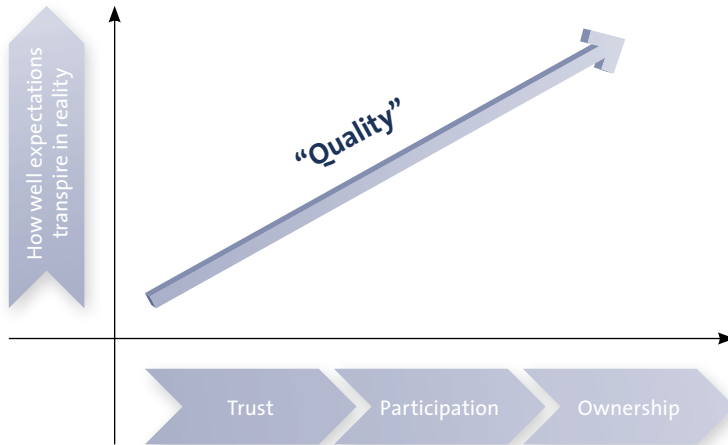
Since most the discussion focused on students' perceptions related to the quality of higher education, it could be surmised that what we have here is at least a rough idea of a student-based concept of quality. This model points towards the student concept of quality being a process in which quality outcomes depends on how well universities meet students' expectations, and how well quality processes and the realisation and management of student expectations are owned by the university.

DISCUSSING QUALITY ASSURANCE

The outlined processes and themes related to quality are mirrored in the conceptualisation of quality assurance. In the context of the data, quality assurance could be seen as the act of detecting how well the processes of quality outlined above play out and how they can be developed in university contexts. Like the object of its detection, the three key principles of trust, participation and ownership also apply directly to quality assurance activities. This can be seen in how students, student representatives and university representatives all have expectations of how quality assurance activities work and how they should function in relation to the core and conditional expectations. That these three principles also apply in quality assurance, reinforces their role as key elements in activities related to quality in higher education. The same can also be said about the three elements being a process: as in the case of quality, trust, par-

ticipation and ownership also provide a progressive framework for adopting quality assurance systems.

TRUST

The theme of trust unfolds on many different levels in the data and in various activities related to quality assurance.

An important issue that relates to trust is (getting used to) change. At institutions where interviews took place and where quality assurance is not a new area of activity, it is identified as being, first and foremost, an internal issue. However, in cases where the phenomenon is relatively new, quality and quality assurance seem to be considered "international" concepts, which have been externally imposed via domestic policy. In these countries, trust towards these practices is still developing (particularly in Eastern European countries). This element of external imposition is reflected not only by university representatives but also in students' stories. At one institution, the following was discussed:

> *"Some students think that they are definitely heard when speaking about social issues but they are not so confident about whether their opinion is taken into account when speaking about global issues like education reforms and quality of studies."*

The successful adoption of work in bettering quality requires adopting a so-called "quality culture". This usually means a working culture in which all actors develop ownership of their activities and in which decentralised elements of quality assurance become paramount. This includes stakeholder participation and consultation (especially with students). In countries where this is the norm, the data from the institutional site visits indicates that there is a high level of internalisation of quality assurance activities and processes and a relatively good quality culture. This, however, appears to be rather difficult in higher education systems and institutions, which are used to having hierarchical and/or highly centralised management systems.

This is reflected in the data by examples of how management and staff are used to "older practices" or centralised systems and how they are weary or sceptical of adopting new practices. Students also appear to be somewhat unaccustomed to "open space discussions" and may be "afraid of complaining." It would appear that in the case of staff, age is also a factor in this. At one institution in particular, students felt they could more easily approach younger staff members.

> *"Some teachers accept our suggestions if you approach them… young teachers react better and like it when students come with new ideas for teaching… older teachers do not react well."*

This kind of process towards internalisation could be thought of as being cultural assimilation. One university level manager remarked how there had been changes in attitude. According to them, the introduction of different quality assurance activities, for example international review activities, have inspired people to experience for themselves that:

> "... Quality assurance is good... it helps... it's not necessarily an enemy... quality is a "friend", not a form of control."

The same manager had noticed this kind of change in her teaching work. In one course, students had been allowed to assist in planning the next week's lecture. They went on to design the lecture and gave presentations themselves. The lecture was a success and the students were left "wanting more". She had, at the point, felt unable to take too much time out of the planned teaching schedule for such activities. However, the positive feedback was enough to make her reconsider that the teaching and lecturing methods need to be changed.

Processes relating to change in working cultures can be slow. This is also the case when putting formal quality assurance structures into practice. At one institution, a member of the university management felt very pleased with the level of improvement shown in the work of quality assurance bodies in different departments, when the reports were, for the first, handed in on time instead of the departments "always delaying" this process. In effect, adopting any quality and quality assurance activities, not to mention cultures, requires a good level of awareness and long-term encouragement of all higher education groups to take part in quality assurance and development activities.

With regards to student engagement, the trust issue is particularly important. It presents the first and the most difficult obstacles to participation in quality assurance activities. Firstly, students should be trusted as partners. Students stated, for example, that the lack of a welcoming attitude on behalf of the university staff towards student engagement, which can be seen to clearly limit student participation. As a result, it could be seen that:

> "Students don't really believe in the efficiency in the channels for communication with the university management."

Secondly, with students also being new to quality assurance activities, they also need to be encouraged to participate in those processes. At one institution, students were very unaccustomed to an "open discussion". Also, a welcoming, open environment needs to be fostered. A good practice at one institution highlighted how:

> "The first lesson was [organised] to cooperate with the teachers, the teachers motivated students to do this, to feel open."

Thirdly, a major issue that students have in terms of trust is the fear of being critical towards the university or teachers. This is especially true if there is a power paradigm involved, for example how the teaching staff gives grades.

> *"The students stated that they can express their opinion free[ly] in most cases. Only towards special docents where students fear repressions in their exams or a general punishment in a course in the case of [giving] bad evaluation results [to teachers]."*

This fear is exacerbated in situations where students' scholarships and finances depend on their marks and academic achievements. In all site visits, students placed high value on anonymity and security in giving feedback. Students tend to mistrust universities' promises of anonymity especially when a feedback system requires some form of personal identification or traces, such as logging in.

Fourthly, the trust that students place on the system of student representation is an area of concern. In order for student participation to work, a functioning system of student representation is needed. This requires awareness of such a system, but also trust in the system and towards on the part of students those students working as representatives. In some cases, the student representation system seems to work very well, but in others not all. The following quotation sums the overall feeling in the data:

> *"Some feel if they have problems, they can contact student representatives. Some feel they are good, some feel they are not as approachable as they can be. Some people do not understand what they do."*

Trust in the student representation is also dependent on the overall trust placed in students as partners.

> *"The reps are not really heard… they can vote but not enough to change anything… feel like the power is only formal one… doesn't really help".*

Lastly, communication plays an increasingly important role in maintaining students' trust in quality assurance activities. Failure to actively acknowledge students' input and feedback and the failure to communicate or provide observable improvements, can make students feel that their feedback is of little value. This leads to an overall lack of trust and lack of faith in quality assurance systems.

While trust would, in the case of quality assurance, also be a key element in adopting quality assurance or, indeed, a quality culture, the next principle is participation.

The data indicates that a lack of general awareness of quality assurance is a major obstacle in reaching the goals of participation. While in some places, students had a relatively good idea of what quality assurance means and how students can participate in it, this was not the case in all institutional site-visits. In one, the interviewing team states how:

> *"There was a big group of students who was completely not aware of any accreditation procures and didn't associate student questionnaire[s] or any other tools with quality provision. In the group where students were aware of quality assurance procedures, the opinion and level of knowledge [differed]."*

Based on the examples from data, it appears that awareness of quality assurance is often enhanced when there are students who look up the university's accreditations or certificates online, when they have student friends on quality assurance bodies or teaching development units, and when the pictures of quality assurance bodies, including student members, are online.

Of course, it is not always sufficient to be simply aware of these procedures. The participants need to be equipped with a certain knowhow in order to engage in these activities. This is the case for students, student representatives and university staff working in quality assurance. Students need to receive guidance on how they can give constructive feedback. This is evident from an interview with a university staff member, who remarked how students do not always give "useful feedback." In the case of student representatives, one student representative remarked how "there is a lack of training on quality assurance."

A key aspect relating to participation is how the lack of "genuine participation" of students and how the formal information regarding student participation does not transpire with practices in reality.

> *"There is not really a genuine participation of students in higher education, despite the fact that it is on paper."*

This, of course, is related to the role of students being equal partners and whether they are trusted as such.

It would also appear that a key element of quality, already identified in the earlier section, having well balanced study workloads, bears relevance in students participating actively in quality assurance activities. Student representatives in quite a few institutions described how heavy and stressful study workloads resulted in high thresholds for taking up voluntary work, including student representation in university bodies,

such as teaching development units and quality assurance bodies. This was felt to be exacerbated by the experience that "students do not feel as equal partners" in such bodies and if there was generally a lack of the university as a whole participating in quality assurance activities (too few meetings, inactivity of bodies, limited or dysfunctional work of bodies).

A key issue brought up by both student representatives and university staff was how participation requires taking initiative. They mentioned how:

> *"Often, one only needs to speak up about the problems... if someone takes the initiative, it's discussed usually."*

There was some discussion on students' lack of interest to participate in quality assurance activities. At one institution, there were students who doubted the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, but who had not, on the other hand, tried to solve any problems either. It should be noted that this is not necessarily caused by slack, rather it is linked to students being encouraged to participate and their awareness of a quality culture and their roles within it. An encouraging atmosphere is enhanced by the welcoming attitude of university staff. At another institution, one law student had suggested that a study excursion to a court of justice should be organised at a study course. Apparently, the teacher had been very pleased and keen about the idea. The suggestion had not yet been taken up at the time when this study is written, but for the student the:

> *"[m]ost important thing is they did not say no immediately."*

OWNERSHIP

Like with quality, the next step in the process of having successful quality assurance in place is acquiring ownership. Ownership is key for internalising and successfully adopting quality assurance practices and a quality culture.

There are various obstacles in the way of universities and their internal groups are able to claim ownership of their quality assurance activities. Formal steps towards integrating quality assurance are key, but are not sufficient in themselves. A manifestation of this how student participation in quality assurance may exist "on paper" but not in reality. This kind of partial integration suggests that a process (even by-law) is in place, but that the university has not taken ownership of it. As one student indicated, this is a "very superficial approach". This kind of superficial approach is also apparent in cases where student representatives are selected by the university and not by students themselves. In such cases, students are not able to claim ownership of their own role in a university democracy.

A key issue raised by students that relates to ownership is the need for teaching staff and the university to accept the feedback of students. Essentially, this means that the teacher needs to take ownership over the process of collecting feedback on his/her own teaching. Students feel that the functionality and success of quality assurance activities is highly dependent on the acceptance of and goodwill towards the process by the subject of the quality assurance activity in question, for example a teacher.

"The students stated that every method for quality assurance can only be good if the evaluation process is accepted by the evaluated."

"Relevance of [own feedback] is mostly dependent on the acceptor."

In fact, students felt that this aspect of ownership has the "biggest influence" in assuring quality in a successful manner. There are also cases in the data where the level of acceptance of staff to student feedback appears to differ across different levels and different members of staff within an institution. In the latter case, the students stated that their influence was greater on institutional level than on the programme level. This suggests that these particular institutions have not yet managed to disseminate a functioning quality culture and among their staff.

It was mentioned before how universities may feel that quality assurance is externally imposed. Symptomatic of this is how some universities seem to feel that student representation in quality assurance is forced on them. There was talk in the data of how interviewees viewed quality assurance as being internally "forced upon different groups" at a university. Forcing, of course, suggests something unpleasant and that there is reluctance. Similarly, when quality assurance is seen to be more of a "formal" aspect stemming from the central level of the university, it becomes almost divorced from the day-to-day workings and culture of the university.

It is important to note here, that students have also not yet completely adopted quality as an area of work by themselves. The data indicates towards students participating more in student union activities that involving social dimensions and everyday life (food, housing, living conditions) instead of issues like quality. In one case, academic issues were seen to be issues at the national level, not institutional level ones., and in another quality issues were seen to be "global" issues (mentioned before).

Another key issue raised by the participants is how the ownership of different quality dimensions factors into quality assurance activities, e.g. the feedback of students. Emphasis was placed on the different levels where feedback could be provided, how useful it is, where the impact of the feedback is apparent, and what is asked and how. For example, students indicate that a feedback survey is good only if it asks the right questions and has the right scope.

"In order to be efficient it should not only look into the teacher's performance but also into proposals for curricular development."

Hence, a key element of good feedback collection mechanisms means addressing all the key areas in which students have core expectations. Another key element of feedback is the need for making constructive feedback possible. This need was identified by both students and university management alike. While numerical or statistically viable responses are a useful tool, they are not that productive in resulting in change. Instead, "more open questions are needed" which are seen to result in more "direct and constructive feedback."

An intrinsic part of claiming ownership of student feedback and quality assurance activities is to have transparent communication on the impact of the feedback with those who provide the feedback. This reinforces the idea that they are being heard, so as not to evoke feelings that, for example, it is "just a formal initiative coming from the institution to fill these questionnaires".
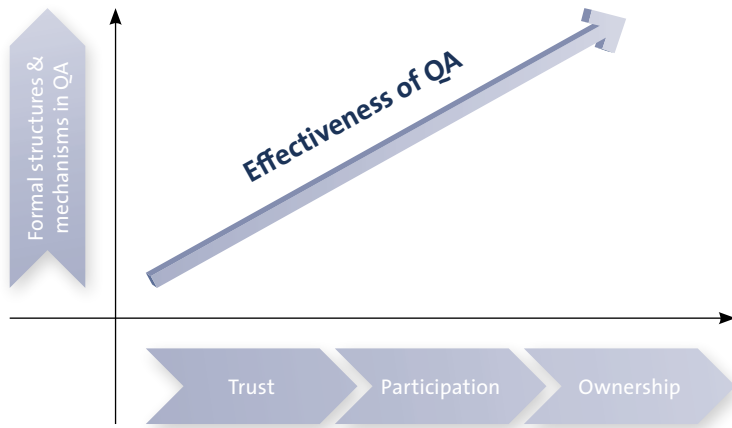
A key issue that came up in the discussions all across the board was the need for an institutional commitment to quality assurance and development. The practices that were mentioned included a set of clear aims related to these in the institution's mission statement. In one case, this meant that:

> "Based on the development plan of the university, all activities in the field of quality development in teaching and learning were brought together in a single conceptual strategy."

In another case, quality assurance work was seen to be similarly reliant on "the agreement of objectives". This was viewed as being crucial in stimulating the implementation of quality improvement processes at the faculty and other levels.

EMERGENCE OF THE CORE PROCESS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

As with quality, trust, participation and ownership can be seen to be the building blocks of quality assurance in higher education. They provide the integral elements and principles which universities and the actors within them should adopt. And, same as with quality, these principles also build on each other and their relation to one another other seems to indicate a progression. However, what is different is that various formal dimensions of structures of quality assurance are also inherent to this process. Seeing as the formal dimensions are, in their own way, starting points for quality assurance activities, they cannot, as such, be included in any of the three principles/phases. The effectiveness of quality assurance can therefore be depicted as the relationship among the three principles and the formal dimensions.

Formal structures & mechanisms in QA (vertical axis)

Effectiveness of QA (diagonal arrow)

Trust — Participation — Ownership

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

There were a few issues that came up in the analysis that would need to be mentioned but which did not fit the scope of the main research.

The term "quality" was translated into similar but also ambiguous terms such as "prestige" and "good" but also "international" and "reputable" in the data. The idea that quality is interchangeable with these terms is interesting because none of these concepts, some more than others, are easy to describe or explain and their meaning and significance rely heavily on context. The use of the term prestige is especially interesting. Out of all the terms, its ambiguity falls in the same class as that of quality. When students or universities expect "prestige" in higher education, what are they expecting? This would be an interesting area for further research that would give more insight into the generation of students' expectations towards universities and how universities can set about managing students' expectations better.

Another area that would be useful to research more in-depth is the division between the "formal" and "informal" dimensions of quality and quality assurance. What areas can be seen as formal or informal? What activities fall in either category? One crucial issue that could be examined is with which student participation and the development of quality are associated.

In one institution it was mentioned that students felt that being "clients" (consumers) made the university more effective. However, it would be very interesting to conduct a more in-depth, comparative case study about this particular type of context in relation to the theory that has emerged from this study. It could be speculated whether this feeling stems from lack of trust, participation and ownership, where students seek reassurance from a different kind of a power paradigm.

4.3   CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that quality, in the eyes of students, is a much wider concept than the sum of its attributes. Students' perceptions on quality, and thus quality assurance, revolve around the processes relating to how student expectations are generated and met, the ownership of these processes, and how these processes incorporate the main principles of trust, partnership and ownership. This relates especially to the treatment of students as equal partners and the need for student participation. The same principles are also found to be present in quality assurance activities, reinforcing their existence as key building blocks in constructing and developing higher education.

The analysis indicates that due consideration needs to be taken in order to understand the students' role and students' circumstances more effectively in student participation. Issues such as workload, the equal status of students as partners, encouragement and the provision of necessary knowledge and tools, are key in optimising student participation in any work related to (the quality of) higher education.

The section on quality assurance also indicates that adopting quality assurance and quality cultures is a gradual process. The adoption of quality assurance activities in higher education and translating international level higher education policy to national and local levels seems to be a tricky and slow process. It would appear that the first step would be to adopt formal structures. However, it is essential to continue that development further; among the key lessons that can be learned from this study is that trust, participation and ownership related activities must be enhanced in order to move this process forward. This requires a firm commitment from all stakeholders and groups involved in higher education.

The findings of this study are in line with the outcomes of the other research parts that have been completed in the QUEST project, including the consultation conference with stakeholders held in Malta in December 2012 (see the previous chapter of this publication).

The first part of Volume II in the QUEST research publication series, called *"Quest for Quality: Survey on Students' Perspectives"*, implies that students had "a multi-dimensional concept of quality in higher education" (ESU, 2013). The research findings based on the institutional site visits also reflect this concept. The difference here is that, while the survey investigates levels of agreement with certain pre-defined dimensions of quality, this current study investigates students' conceptualisations more inductively (user-based), with the result being a concept of quality that centres on students' expectations and how they are met. However, these expectations and related processes (such as employability, commitment of teachers, being a part of an academic culture, and others) can, in general, be seen to correspond with the dimensions of quality used to frame the survey study (quality as transformation, quality as added-value, etc.).

The findings of this study are also supported by Volume I of the QUEST publication series, called *"QUEST for Quality for Students: Going Back to Basics"*. That publication included a desk-research that showed how student participation in quality assurance has increased since the beginning of the Bologna process, especially since the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education were adopted in 2005. The authors of said publication identified various obstacles that students face in their involvement in quality assurance. The highlighted problems included not only involving students, but the empowerment of quality assurance itself to lead for real improvement. It was seen, through the eyes of national student representatives that formally outlined student involvement within quality assurance structures does not always mean genuine and active student participation in quality assurance. Their reports also identified large differences in the level and quality of student involvement in quality assurance among the countries of the European Higher Education Area. That quality assurance systems are still new or underdeveloped was seen as a possible cause of this (ESU 2012). Collectively, all these prior observations support the idea that trust and participation are, indeed, key issues in developing working quality cultures. They also reinforce the notion that quality assurance systems need to be developed gradually.

Similar strains of discussions took place during the consultation conference with stakeholders in Malta in December 2012. The general report from that conference also calls for the need to move beyond formal structure, i.e. the "need to move away from the notion that quality assurance is purely a bureaucratic process", and the need for "external mechanisms for quality assurance [to] foster the idea that institutions are responsible for their own quality". This reinforces the findings of this study, namely that higher education institutions need to take ownership of these processes. What is even more interesting, however, is how student participation "on paper" (an issue discussed by interviewees in this study), can be seen to be a manifestation of this trend of viewing quality assurance as a purely bureaucratic process. It could even be said that the degree of student participation may serve as an indicator for the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms and the level of quality culture in place.

In terms of the key findings of this study, it was particularly interesting to find that the aspects of trust and ownership were mentioned already in the conclusions of the first publication. It is stated how "ownership and mutual trust are key factors in creating a quality culture" (ESU 2012, p.23). The literature review in "Quest for Quality for Students: Going Back to Basics" also shows how numerous authors affirm the benefits of student involvement, not only for the processes and its outcomes, but also for creating ownership amongst all members of the academic community as co-responsible stakeholders. It can, beyond doubt, be said that the analysis from the institutional site visits reaffirms the validity and place of trust, participations and ownership alike. However, according to this study they are not only crucial factors, but they also represent key stages in the gradual process towards developing quality cultures and effective quality assurance mechanisms.

The findings of this study provide an insight into students' concepts of quality higher education, the obstacles that students face when getting involved in quality assurance activities and the general conditions required in order to overcome these challenges. In so far as the issues of trust, participation and ownership come in, it could be inferred that, in order to surpass these challenges, general capacity-building measures need to be taken so that students can participate fully in these processes. However, it can also be said that adopting quality assurance systems and fostering quality cultures means taking a leap of faith in adopting students as equal partners.

In conclusion, more research is required on how students' expectations are generated and how the quality of higher education is conceptualised, especially in relation to external influences. It is important to note that the results of this study do not provide exhaustive answers or definitions for quality. As with most grounded theories, the results here yield as many questions as they do answers. Still, the analysis and findings do provide a useful theoretical framework for how quality and quality assurance are perceived and experienced as phenomena and processes (by students), how quality is formed, and what issues affect these outcomes. This framework can aid European students, higher education institutions and other stakeholders in higher education in achieving better levels of quality in higher education.

THESE ARE THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THIS CHAPTER:

- A model for pursuing quality emerges from the institutional site-visit data, which views quality as a process centred on students' expectations and how they transpire in reality.

- Students' core expectations for quality higher education include the teaching content and learning process while conditional expectations are related to the environment and conditions that are believed to be necessary in realising these core expectations, such as services, facilities and system structures related to studying, as well as the academic environment and culture.

- 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 being met in higher education.

- The principles and values necessary in building quality in higher education are trust, participation and ownership.

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

- Universities need to develop their communication and information channels in order to manage student expectations better.

- Universities should consider and understand the students' role and students' circumstances more effectively in student participation in quality assurance, taking note of the obstacles such as excessive study workload, unequal status as partners and lack of necessary knowledge and tools.

- Students need to be encouraged to be active, take responsibility for their role as partners and to take initiative.

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

- The degree of student participation may serve to indicate the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms and the level of quality culture in place

- More research is required on how student expectations are generated and how quality is conceptualised, especially external influences.

- The relationship between the different spaces in which the formal and informal areas of quality and quality assurance play out is also a worthwhile area for further study.

5   OVERALL FINDINGS

In this section, we have compiled the main findings from the stakeholder consultation conference, held in Malta from 30 November to 1 December 2012, and the findings of the institutional site visits, which were analysed in the pan-European case study included in this report. The overall findings have been categorised under three themes: quality of higher education, student participation and general developments.

These observations contribute to the main goals of the Quest for Quality for Students (QUEST) project. The project aims to identify students' perceptions of what quality in higher education is and how students can become more involved in quality assurance and enhancement processes. The research outcomes also contribute to the aim of the European Students' Union, to define a student-based concept for the quality of higher education.

5.1   ON QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- A model for pursuing quality in higher education emerges from the institutional site-visit data, which views quality as a process centred on student expectations and how they transpire in reality.

- 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.

- Universities need to develop their communication and information channels in order to manage student expectations better.

- Rankings can be an instrument for providing transparency, but it is very difficult to encompass the quality dimension of education.

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

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

5.2   ON STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

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

- Students have responsibilities as stakeholders and as partners.

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

- If students provide feedback, they need to be made aware of the changes they have initiated and that their input was valued.

- Students need to be encouraged to be active, take responsibility for their role as partners and to take initiative.

- Students' motivation for participating in quality assurance and development activities can be enhanced only if the quality assurance activities and procedures are effective and made visible.

- National policies and legislative frameworks are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure student participation in quality assurance.

- Universities 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 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.

5.3   ON GENERAL DEVELOPMENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

- There is a strong need to move away from the notion that quality assurance is purely a bureaucratic process.

- External mechanisms for quality assurance should foster the idea that institutions are responsible for their own quality.

- Quality assurance procedures will not assure quality alone, but they are able to detect it.

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

- The impact of quality assurance activities often comes with a delay.

- A single tool for transparency in higher education is not sufficient.

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

- Despite the external review philosophy being based on the continuity of the process, in practice this does not really happen.

- The degree of student participation may serve to indicate the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms and the level of quality culture in place.

- 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.

- The relationship between the different spaces in which the formal and informal areas of quality and quality assurance play out is also a worthwhile area for further study.

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ANNEX I—QUEST CONSULTATION CONFERENCE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

FROM 30 NOVEMBER TO 1 DECEMBER 2012

Conference programme

30TH NOVEMBER, FRIDAY

Part I: Setting the scene

09.00–10.00   **Welcome words and introduction**

- Mario Cachia, President of KSU
- Prof. Juanito Camilleri, Rector of the University of Malta
- Hon. Dolores Cristina, Minister of Education and Employment (tbc)
- Karina Ufert, Chairperson of ESU—Recent developments in QA and way forward

10.00–10.30   **Presentation of QUEST project outcomes, preliminary findings of ESU research activities**
by Liliya Ivanova, Executive Committee member of ESU .

10.30–11.00   Coffee break

11.00–12.30   Parallel working sessions

Session 1: The link between external and internal quality assurance

Input by: Representative from Malta, Quality Assurance sector
Dr. Marja-Liisa Saarilammi, Finnish Higher education evaluation council (FINHEEC)

Session 2: Impact of quality assurance through visibility

Input by: Representative from Malta, Quality Assurance sector
Axel Aerden, Accreditation organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)

Session 3: Stakeholders' participation in Quality Assurance

12.30–14.00   Lunch break

14.00–15.30   **Roundtable discussion—"QUEST for More Europe?"**

- Tia Loukkola, Head of Unit Quality Management, European University Association (EUA)
- Achim Hopbach, President of European Association for QA in Higher education (ENQA)
- Stephan Delplace, Secretary General of European Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE)

Moderator: Allan Päll
Rapporteur: ESU

15.30–16.30   QUEST Café—restyled World Café for QUEST

Part II: Getting a grip on recent developments in QA

09.30–10.30 **Discussion–Not everything, that can be counted, counts?**
U-Multirank presentation by Dr. Don Westerheijden, Centre for
Higher Education Policy studies (CHEPS)

10.30–10.45 Coffee Break

Part III: QUEST for Quality for Students

10.45–12.15 **Parallel workshop sessions—developing students' quality concept**

1 ESG implementation—what we can learn from the past?
2 Students' participation in QA—status quo.
3 Students' engagement in QA—support mechanisms.
4 How to connect the three key quality circles: teacher, student and
quality?—Christine Lechner, Innsbruck University
5 EU2020 Review—Elisabeth Gehrke, ESU

12.15–13.00 Lunch break

13.00–14.30 **Parallel workshop sessions continue**

1 ESG revision—way forward—Karina Ufert, ESU
2 Students' participation in QA—how to strengthen it—
Liliya Ivanova, ESU
3 Students' engagement in QA—support mechanisms—
Iain Delworth, sparqs
4 EU2020 Review—Elisabeth Gehrke, ESU

14.30–14.45 Coffee Break

14.45–15.30 **Closing part**
Address by Dr Philip von Brockdorff, Chairman of the national commission for Higher education (NCFHE)
Final report of the Consultation seminar by Alina Gavra
ESU Closing remarks

ANNEX II—SITE VISIT GUIDELINES

These guidelines aim to help the review team to prepare for the institutional site visits.

Obligatory list of interviews to be arranged / Default list of interviews to be arranged:

- Interview with the a representative of the quality assurance unit (or similar) in the higher education institution

- Interview with the student representative in charge of academic affairs and quality

- Focus group exercise with students, 8-10 people including undergraduates and postgraduates.

METHODOLOGY

The site visits form an important basis for conclusions—with QUEST research aiming to provide answers of the following questions:

1 How can students' participation be enhanced through quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms/systems/frameworks?

2 What sort of information do students need to be provided to them in relation to what they perceive as quality education?

The site visits will employ the methods of active/passive observation as well as of interviews and student focus group exercise.

Site visits will be organised with the help of the respective national unions and/or project partner.

The site visits will be conducted by a team consisting of two experts (ESU and project partners' representatives). Members of the ESU QA experts' pool, trained during the workshops organised on the project, could be also selected to be part of these teams. A site visit will last approximately 2 to 3 days. After each site visit a report will be produced, which is a responsibility of site visit coordinator in cooperation with the other

team member. These reports will be produced on the basis of the input received during the interviews and the focus groups

Methodology for constructing the focus group:

The sample for the focus group has individuals with characteristics of the overall population and aim to contribute to helping the research gain a greater understanding of the topic. When constructing the focus group a balance between the representatives of the different academic units of the higher education institution should be respected. Inviting institution should present a list for the participants of the working group to the coordinator of the review not later than 7 days before the visit. It is expected, that both undergraduate and postgraduate students will be asked to join the review, along with the international students. Each focus group will take approximately 1:30—2 hours; the discussion will be recorded for following analysis. It is recommendable that there will be 8-10 people per focus group.

Coverage of costs

The costs for the site visit will be covered by ESU. This includes economy class travel for the site visit team, including the travel to and from the airport/railway station. Accommodation and food will be also covered, according with the financial rules of ESU and in respect of the project handbook.

Site Visit Report

The site visit team is required to produce a written report on the whole site visit. This report should be finalised 14 days after the site visit is conducted.

Responsibilities

Site visit team coordinator

- Designs the agenda for the site visit

- Facilitates communication within the SV team and establishes contact to hosting institution (NUS, higher education institution, other)

- Remains in regular contact with the hosting institution (NUS, higher education institution, other) regarding any questions concerning the agenda of the site visit, meetings with the students and staff

- Organises task division in the team

- Makes sure the site visit goes according the plan and report being produced on time

- With the help of ESU Secretariat, arranges practicalities, such as travel, accommodation, food and other

- Site visit team

- Comments on the site visits agenda, where relevant

- Actively participates in all meetings of the site visit

- Assists in producing the final report

HOSTING NUS

- Responsds to the need of site visit team to arrange the interviews and focus group with students

- Arranges meetings, as requested by the site visit coordinator

- Receives the draft final report for comments, before it goes to ESU QUEST research team

QUESTIONS TO THE FOCUS GROUPS OF STUDENTS:

1 Motivation

   a What was your motivation to choose the institution you are currently studying in? What factors influenced your choice

   b What is the most rewarding learning experience you have had on your programme/course and why?

   c What were your expectations towards the institution and the study programme when you were admitted in the university? What were your expectations from the enrolment in higher education? How these expectations changed

2 Perceptions on quality

a   What makes your institution/programme/course a good one? What in your opinion are the elements of a good institution/programme course?

b   What makes your experience as a student a valuable one?

c   What is the most rewarding learning experience you have had on your programme/course and why?

d   What do you understand by the term quality within your university context?

3   Awareness of quality assurance mechanisms

a   Are you aware how the quality of your study programme /institution ensured?

b   If yes do you consider that these mechanisms are effective

c   Do you know what EQAR, ESU, ENQA, EUA, ESG is1? Have you heard about any European initiatives in the area of higher education?

4   Information needs

a   What source of information you used when making your decision concerning higher education?

b   How important was each of these sources?

c   What was the quality of these sources of information?

5   Academic freedom

a   Do you feel free to express your opinion in the institution where you are studying?

b   Do you feel that your opinion is heard?

QUESTIONS TO THE QA UNIT REPRESENTATIVE:

1   What quality means to you

a What makes your institution a good one? What in your opinion are the elements of a good institution/programme course?

b What makes your experience as a manager a valuable one?

c What do you understand by the term quality within your university context?

d Can you provide any examples of good practice of improving your teaching in your institution?

2 Quality culture at your institution

a Could you describe the internal quality assurance system in your institutions and the student role within it?

b Do students in your institution have a voice within the university? Are they listened to? If so, how is their opinion heard/acted upon?

c In what contexts, both formal and informal, is quality/ teaching practice/ learning experience discussed in your institution?

d How do you think the institution supports teaching and learning?

e Is quality something, which is imposed externally? How do you know what works well in your institution?

3 Information needs:

a What sources of information students use to choose study programme/ institution?

QUESTIONS TO THE LOCAL STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES:

Discussion about:

1 What students are most often complaining about in relation to the quality of their study?

2 What are the obstacles for student involvement in the internal QA mechanisms?