The Role of The Student in Quality Assurance Processes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

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Abstract- *In recent years, the role of students in the quality assurance of higher education has become recognized, across Europe, as being both necessary and desirable. Students have increasingly become involved in the improvement and enhancement of their own learning experiences. Whether it be through providing feedback on the courses they have taken, contributing to the development of learning and teaching in their subject area, participating in university decision making processes, or representing student views in any number of ways through a student union or other representative body – students' voices are today being heard loudly and clearly and, ever more often, their views are being taken seriously.*

This report brings together a wide range of sources of evidence about the variety of types and levels of involvement of students in the quality assurance of higher education in the European Higher Education Area. Students are involved within the processes of their 'own' institutions, as part of the quality assurance of institutions and programmes by outside bodies, and in the review of the quality assurance of those bodies themselves.

Participation takes many forms, both formal and informal. ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 2006) provides opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas on all areas of the quality assurance of higher education. The rich diversity of student involvement with quality assurance provides us with an abundant resource from which we can research and share good practice and so help all involved to learn and to develop. I hope this report will assist with the achievement of that objective.

Keywords- Quality Assurance, Student Involvement, Institutional Audit, External Quality, Quality Assurance Process.

I. INTRODUCTION

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Quality Assurance in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are responsible for awarding their own degrees i.e. UK degrees are not state accredited awards and each HEI is responsible for maintaining the standards and quality of their degrees. Most HEIs carry out both regular monitoring and periodic reviews of their programmes of study, as well as use a system of external examining to underpin their internal quality assurance processes. This helps to maintain the standards and quality of their degrees.

External examiners are independent academic experts from another institution, or from relevant professional practice. They report to the head of institution on a number of factors around the standard of award made, compared to other similar awards across the country, and about the fairness by which the processes of assessment, examination and determination of award have been conducted.

To help with their internal quality assurance, HEIs can draw upon a number of national and UK external reference points, such as the various components of the national Academic Infrastructure [Framework(s) for Higher Education qualifications, benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*] and European reference points such as the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ENQA, 2005).

The emphasis is on institutions managing their own quality assurance processes as they are responsible for the award they make. Internal quality assurance processes are monitored, however, through external quality assurance procedures. This takes place for a variety of purposes:

➢ to promote quality;
➢ to provide public information;
➢ to ensure minimum standards;
➢ to protect the public; to provide accountability;

> ➢ to protect and enhance the reputation of UK higher education.

There are a number of external quality assurance processes to which HEIs are subject, including:

• the regulations which surround degree awarding powers and university title;
• the funding council's processes of institutional monitoring and the review of the quality of research through the research assessment exercise;
• the review and monitoring by government departments and public bodies; reviews by a wide range of professional and statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBS)academic quality review; the most significant for most institutions being the review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Student involvement with quality assurance

Institutional audit (England and Northern Ireland), institutional review (Wales) and ELIR (Scotland) all involve students and student representatives as a significant part of the process. All methods include auditors/reviewers meeting with student groups and student representative bodies.

The documentation about institutions provided for auditors/reviewers before any external quality assurance visit does differ between Scotland and the rest of the UK. In Scotland student representative bodies work with institutions in preparing the Reflective Analysis (RA). In England, Wales and Northern Ireland student representative bodies are invited to submit a Student Written Submission (SWS), separate from the self-evaluation document (SED) which the institution submits. The SWS can be confidential if the student body wishes. However, QAA encourages student representative bodies and institutions to share their respective submitted reports. In some cases the SWS has been no more than an endorsement of the institution's selfevaluation document, to which the student unions have contributed in a similar way to the Scottish model of writing the RA.

Other differences also exist between the method in Scotland and the rest of the UK. National student representatives are included as full members of the ELIR review teams. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there is no student representative as a member of the audit/review team. The different elements which make up the totality of the national quality frameworks are in their own ways considered to offer excellent opportunities for students and their representatives to be involved.

The Quality Assurance Framework considers the importance of providing students, and other stakeholders, with public information about the quality of provision.

Following on from the report about *Information on quality and standards in higher education* (HEFCE, 2002) the teaching quality information (TQI) website was launched in September 2004.

Student involvement with external quality assurances processes is becoming embedded within the national quality frameworks. However, it is HEIs themselves that are responsible for the standards and quality of their academic awards andprogrammes, which is why it is important that students are part of internal quality assurance processes.

'Institutions are generally aware of the importance of enabling the participation of students in managing the quality of teaching, learning and the learning environment, and the need for representation arrangements to be periodically reviewed... The audit reports have found a general recognition that "student representation is a key component of quality assurance in higher education in the twenty first century", and that it is in the interests of individual institutions to listen and respond to the views of their students, presented either individually or through representatives.'

Students participate in HEIs' decision making processes through representation by elected officers at the higher levels on 'key' or 'appropriate' committees. 'Appropriate'is generally defined as the governing body, Senate or equivalent and committees concerned with learning and teaching, quality assurance and the student experience in general. 'Broadly speaking there appears to be near universal agreement on the types of committees of Senate and Court that students should be represented upon.'

At some institutions the inclusion of student elected representatives in decision-making processes is part of a Student Charter or Student Entitlement Framework. At otherinstitutions, students are made aware of their rights to representation through Student Handbook, or Guides for new students. At many institutions student representatives may also be invited to join appropriate working groups, consultation exercises and focus groups. At operational or departmental level student representation can take many forms, forms, 'membership of programme or course committees; representation on departmental, school or faculty committees; and staff – student liaison, consultative or advisory committees.' However institutions have found that both attendance and engagement at some of these meetings by student representatives can sometimes be low. 'In terms of

attendance and engagement, the survey has found that around a third of institutions have difficulties with representatives that don't attend meetings. A further third of institutions have students that attend but don't engage with the processes. A final third of institutions have student representatives who attend and are engaged in the processes. It is clear that the difficulties in engaging students do not solely lie with the personalities of the student representatives concerned, but are also due to features and practices that institutions themselves have control over.'

Benefits of student involvement in quality assurance

This paper has identified some difficulties in involving students in quality assurance processes and issues, but it is not just institutional practices which cause difficulties for students. It is suggested that students are under more pressure than ever before, with more than 58% of students reporting that they work, and with 71% of those saying they need to work to pay for essentials (Unite Student Living Report 2006 www.unitestudents.com).

It was reported at a presentation given by the NUS at a recent conference (Student Complaints and Appeals, London, 20 June 2006) that with the pressures of increasing competitiveness in job markets, the increasing fear of debt and because of general feelings of loneliness and isolation, 1 in 4 students are having mental health problems.

It would be unfair of HEIs and external bodies such as the QAA to contribute to this pressure unnecessarily by highlighting student involvement in quality assurance processes over and above academic studies. However, institutions do support elected student union sabbatical officers' positions, and some institutions provide financial assistance for employing union staff officers, all of which can help to support participation. There are also some very important benefits for student participation in quality assurance, which have been reported by student representative bodies and the NUS (The National Union of Students).

'The strengths identified by the student representative bodies primarily focused upon the notion of giving students a voice, and providing them with the opportunity to comment upon quality and standards and the student experience.'

The SWS (Student Written Submission) is considered to be a useful and valuable document, which in some cases has provided student unions with an evidence base and impetus for change across their institutions. During recent discussions held with representatives from student unions in England and Wales, at least one student union reported that the writing of

the SWS had brought about a change in the dialogue between the union and the institution, leading to a less mistrustful and more positive relationship. Several institutions gave examples of reported 'quick fixes' - such as changing library opening hours - as a result of writing the SWS and of participation in the institutional audit. When questioned further these reported 'quick fixes' had remained permanent features.

Student unions tended to be proud of their SWS reports and suggested that it was the one document produced by the unions that they could be sure that the institution would read. Student unions were reporting positive relationships with their institutions, often fostered as a result of writing a SWS, but it was also reported that involvement at a departmental level could be quite difficult as academic staff could be quite defensive.

As one union summarised it: 'centrally supportive, locally dismissive.' Criticism exists that relationships between institutions and student unions are often dependent on particular individuals, who are elected on a yearly basis. This is being countered by some unions who are beginning to embed the inclusion of quality assurance processes into their strategic plans.

From analysis conducted on the first 70 institutional audit reports we see that the SWS was mentioned in 59 of the reports, and in 39 of the reports there were five or more mentions of the SWS. It also appeared that a number of audit teams seemed to have used the SWS as a starting point for one or several of their enquiries (data presented to CHERI Quality Assurance Seminar Series, The role of students in quality assurance.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the positive aspects of inclusion of students and their representatives with quality assurance processes.

'One of the successes of institutional audit has been student involvement. Many institutions made the point that they already had close relations with students in respect of QA. Student representatives are normally included in all main QA committees and processes in institutions. However, the experience of preparing for audit had facilitated a dialogue with the students' union which was valuable to both parties. In particular it was refreshing to have a renewed focus of attention in this dialogue on the core business of student learning.'

It can take significant effort for a student union to prepare a SWS. For many unions, but especially the smaller ones, finding the officer time for involvement has been an issue. However the NUS has stressed that students do find their involvement in this way valuable and continue to be in support of the process.

It is necessary that all those involved with quality assurance see it as a process And not an end point in itself. External quality assurance is only part of a continual journey of reflection and improvement which HEIs are undertaking. Student involvement in that journey has been shown to be valuable. There needs to be continual engagement by such national bodies as the QAA and its auditors/reviewers, by individual HEIs and by student representative bodies to continue to fully embed the involvement of students in that journey. At any case the benefits of that involvement have been demonstrated to be of great value.

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