

Katarina Aškerc and dr. Alenka Braček Lalić

Students' Engagement in the Quality Assurance Procedures in Slovenian Higher Education

Abstract

According to the Slovenian higher education (HE) legislation students are relatively well integrated in different evaluation procedures as well as in the decision makings on the national and on the institutional level. However, the analysis of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency's (SQAA) report, which contains the evaluation of more than 100 reports prepared by the SQAA experts on a basis of external evaluations, site visits and initial accreditation procedures of Slovenian study programmes and higher education institutions (HEI), and a pilot research conducted among 422 students of Slovenian HEIs, indicated, that only one part of the students' population is directly integrated in the higher education development and quality assurance (QA) procedures. The paper presents the main focus of the SQAA report and respondents' views, opinions and perceptions in the context of students' engagement in creation and development of HE policy, (new) study programmes and curricula, their engagement in different revision procedures of study programmes and learning and teaching methods, as well as student surveys and pedagogic excellence. In a conclusion the authors present the weaknesses and uncertainties, that were met with the pilot research and recommend its improvement. Furthermore, they highlight a few deficiencies which should be improved and enhanced in Slovenian HE system, including a few general amendments to the Slovenian HE legislation, improved cooperation between the students and their representatives in different governing bodies and quite an ambitious recommendation of the establishment of a special national centre or an academy on pedagogical excellence.

Introduction

At the European level, greater engagement of students across whole the higher education system, including student-centred learning (SCL) and quality teaching in general have increased in prominence over the past few decades in the national and transnational debates – like the Bologna Process, state incentives and regulations and competition among the institutions.

The newly revised version of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (ENQA, 2015) presents an important accomplishment on the European level, since it supports and promotes SCL as a standard and makes a more explicit link to the learning and teaching process in the area of internal quality assurance procedures (ESU, 2015). In this context, shifting from 'traditional' to 'student-centred learning', which can take different forms with respect to different types of students (Geven & Attard, 2012), is an on-going reflexive process, in which a constructive interaction and cooperation between students and staff, who are considered as partners, is needed (ESU, 2015). Additionally, the understanding of the term "student engagement" in various quality assurance procedures according to Trowler (2010, 3) is the responsibility of both, students and their institutions, and is "concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources /.../ intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution". Consequently, not only does the senior management must be committed to capturing all the dimensions that affect quality teaching, but also students must be committed to providing feedback on curricula and teaching through evaluations (OECD, 2010, 5) and participating actively in different quality assurance procedures. As OECD (2010, 29) reports, students are becoming a driver for quality teaching, they play an active role and are a powerful respected body in countries, where they have a recognized status. However, at this point, the question of students' motivation and responsibility arises. Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 73–74) identified four clusters of students' motivations, i.e. systems positioning, compliance with authority, personal development and systems advocacy, which are given by students for

undertaking student representative roles and are predicated along two intersecting axes: intrinsic or extrinsic motivation and personal or system focus of students.

Although in the national policy discourse, a number of countries have recognized the need to widen the student participation in higher education, SCL has come to be viewed as more of a necessity (Geven & Attard, 2012). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that national (quality assurance) systems foster institutional involvement in supporting quality teaching, although a few critics demystify the role traditionally allocated to quality assurance, since similar to institutions, agencies and peer reviewers do not have the tools required to define and measure the quality of teaching (OECD, 2010, 24–26). This could be somehow overcome with national centres specially oriented towards the enhancement of pedagogical excellence, but as Klemenčič and Ashwin (2015) write, there are only a few countries that have a national body devoted to an advancement of research related to teaching and learning, furthermore “many countries have no national strategy on teaching and learning in higher education, and advancements in this area are left to individual institutions to formulate and fund«.

However, OECD (2010) reports, that institutions are encouraged by external reviews to set up or reinforce internal quality assurance mechanisms by including a quality teaching aspects, although measuring teaching quality is challenging. Therefore, some institutions have centers for advancement of teaching and learning, »in many institutions, teachers in higher education tend to be evaluated by their students, but are then left to their own devices to self-improve (or not)« (Klemenčič & Ashwin 2015), this is why we agree with the authors, that »a more coordinated and systematic approach is needed to support the development of teaching and learning in higher education« (ibid.). The exercise of collaboration between the leaders of the institution and higher education staff is the main challenge for all institutions (Geven & Attard, 2012), including the administrative staff, students and institution leaders, wherein the students’ collaboration through engagement in governing bodies, where they can collaborate in defining of initiatives, raising concerns about teaching, learning environments, quality of content and teacher attitudes, is of great importance (OECD, 2010). In this context, Lizzio and Wilson (2009) describe actively involved students from three perspectives: functional, where benefits of the university are highlighted, social, wherein society benefits and aspects are exposed, and developmental, where students’ benefits are stressed out.

The students’ engagement in learning and teaching design can lead to students observing improvements and developments in curricular relevance (Trowler, 2010). However, according to ESU (2015), in general, the student respondents, that were included in the ESU survey, were not involved in the development of teaching and assessment methods. In the case of the development of curriculum, the students are involved according to university respondents, and mostly by being part of the university's or students' bodies, “students are elected to be part of different boards, where they can directly or indirectly be part of the decision-making process. Most universities do not involve students in the development of syllabi, however there are some indications of a change, where this is done indirectly through the professors themselves” (ibid., 28, 29). In addition to curricular improvements, students can participate in improving university teaching through students’ evaluations of teaching, which provide: diagnostic feedback to faculty for improving their teaching, a measure of teaching effectiveness for personnel decisions, information for students for the selection of courses and instructors, a component in national and international quality assurance exercise and an outcome or a process description for research on teaching. However, an important, unresolved controversy is whether the students’ evaluations of teaching instruments, which cover multidimensional aspects, literally measure effective teaching (Marsh 2007).

Students' Engagement in Slovenian HE – the Legislative Aspect

The current legislation in the field of HE in the Republic of Slovenia determinates strong students’ engagement in the quality assurance (QA) procedures on the institutional and on the national level as well. Slovenian students are extensively engaged in different kinds of procedures, decision makings, (student)

evaluations of teaching and other activities provided by the HEIs, which is in total compliance with the ESG, other EU policies and theoretical and practical background in general.

The Slovenian Higher Education Act (OG RS 2014) and other legislation acts determine students' participation in different kinds of HEIs procedures. They have the right to participate through their representatives in the work and administration of HEIs, thus, students' representatives are invited to different meetings of the national and HEIs' bodies. Consequently, they have a significant influence on the governance and management of HEIs in terms of their representatives included in majority of governing bodies of HEIs, such as Senate, Governing Board and Academic Board. In this context, one of the HEI's entity is also a Student council as a special governing body of HEIs (regardless of their status: public or private), which is composed of student representatives, who are also ex officio members of the respective HEI's Senate. Furthermore, Senate consists of different commissions, in many of which students have their representatives, i.e. the Commission for quality, Habilitation commission etc. The Student council gives its opinion also on the pedagogical qualifications in the proceedings of election into the titles of academic staff based on the results of a student survey or other instruments for verifying pedagogical work. Student representatives participate in the work of the Academic assembly of a university member or private HEIs and in Governing boards of HEIs. Additionally, the Slovenian Council for Higher Education and the Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA or Agency) both include also student representatives. In the accreditation and evaluation procedures, carried out by the Agency, expert groups consist of at least one student. Furthermore, there is a special act, which regulates the activity of the Slovenian Student Union (SSU), for which it is believed, that is an important stakeholder in the creation of the Slovenian higher education policy and consequently in changing and amending the HE legislation.

The pilot study and the analysis of the SQAA report

In accordance to the legislative aspects, presented above, the authors wanted to gain more insight into the real practices of the Slovenian HEIs associated with the students' engagement in the QA procedures, and with a pilot research acquire the views, opinions and perceptions of a broader student population on being engaged and considered as the creators of the quality HE policies. Furthermore, we wanted to identify the real possibilities of students' active engagement in the following activities: preparing new study programmes/curricula, forming new methods of teaching, learning, assessments and determine what is their engagement in self-evaluation and revision procedures of study programmes according to current trends etc. In order to get an overview regarding the practices at the Slovenian HEIs associated with the before mentioned research questions, in the spring 2015 a short pilot questionnaire was prepared and sent to all accredited HEIs in the Republic of Slovenia (according to the public record maintained by the Ministry responsible for HE there are 3 public universities, 2 private universities and 44 private HEIs, so called independent HEIs) with the request to forward the survey to their students. 422 students' responses were received (out of app. 70.000 students currently enrolled at the Slovenian HEIs), which were analyzed and combined together with the findings and conclusions in the report "Quality in the Slovenian Higher Education and Higher Vocational Education Area in the Period from 2010 to 2013" prepared by the SQAA (2013). The latter was taken into consideration, since it contains the evaluation of more than 100 reports, which were prepared by the SQAA experts on a basis of external evaluations, site visits and initial accreditation procedures. Considering the fact that the SQAA operates according to the ESG standards and has its own Accreditation criteria (OG RS, 2010), which includes also the issues associated with the students' engagement, we used the report and the results of the survey as the main source of data in order to analyze the current state and evaluate if the practices applied at HEIs are adjusted to the HE legislation. It has to be strongly emphasized, that the authors are fully aware that a small sample size presents a limitation in order to generalize the findings and at the same time it also presents a low statistical power. However, for the purposes of the conference we strongly believe, that even a pilot research with a small sample can provide some useful and interesting insights into the research questions.

Results

The results of the pilot survey and the findings based on the SQAA external evaluations are divided into three parts. In the first part the students' perceptions about their engagement in creation and development of HE policy will be presented and the findings retrieved from the SQAA external evaluations will be discussed. In the second part the discussion will be about the students' opinions regarding their engagement in creation of new study programmes/curricula, new methods of teaching, learning, assessment and revision procedures of study programmes. In the last part the focus will be on the rationales for revision of study programmes, student surveys and pedagogic excellence. In the context of the all three parts, recommendation for improvement and further development of the pilot questionnaire and research will be presented.

Regarding students' perceptions connected to their engagement in creation and development of HE policy it is interesting to note that the majority of student respondents does not agree that they are strongly integrated in the creation and development of a HE policy (54.5 %). Moreover, they are even more certain that they are not equally treated compared to other stakeholders in creation and development of HE policy (71.1 %). Almost half of the student respondents (48.6 %) say that their recommendations have not been taken into consideration. But at this point, it has to be emphasized, that quite a high percentage (3.9 %) of the respondents decided for the option "I do not know/no opinion", that is why the question/argument concerned should be reconsidered and rephrased. Concerning students' impact on quality enhancement of study programmes and HEIs the majority of students (55.6 %) strongly believes that they do not have enough influence over quality improvement. These (negative) results of the pilot questionnaire were compared with the outcomes of the SQAA report, in which the conclusions are slightly more positive. Based on the SQAA report, it can be concluded, that the students are adequately represented in all governing bodies at HEIs and that they are satisfied with their role in co-management of the universities. However, in majority of committees students do not have voting rights, although they can exercise them through their student representatives in the Senates. Furthermore, the SQAA report states that "the progress in the area of providing information to students about the work of the Student Councils and representatives is relatively modest" (SQAA, 2013, 16). The reasons for the negative pilot results associated with the students' perception regarding their engagement in the creation and development of HE policy could thus be attributed to the limited voting rights and non-connection between students and their representatives in the governing bodies. The extension of voting rights and enhanced cooperation could be two of possible solutions.

Students' perception, connected to their active engagement in creating new study programmes/curricula, new methods of teaching, learning, assessment, and revision procedures of study programmes is similar to the observations presented previously. Again, with the pilot questionnaire, it was found out, that students are very negatively oriented to these issues. The majority of student respondents does not agree that they have a possibility to be actively engaged in the creation of new study programmes (50 %), the creation of new curricula (54.4 %), the creation of new methods of teaching and learning (50.2 %) and new methods of assessments (54.3 %). In general, 51.7 % of students say that they do not have a possibility to be involved in revision procedures of the study programmes. However, in the context of the above presented data of the pilot survey, it has to be strongly emphasized, that in the case of all questions/arguments as much as 4.6–5.1 % of students did not answer the questions, since they decided for the option "I do not know/no opinion". If, nevertheless, the conclusions, gathered with a pilot research, are generally compared to the conclusions gained by SQAA report, it can be found out, that "there has been a lack of wider integration of students in the evaluation and updating of study programmes in the past. Within the framework of internal quality assurance systems, the initiatives to improve the contents of study programmes and their implementation were not efficiently formally transferred from the initiators to the Senates" (SQAA, 2013, 16). Moreover, the report says that "monitoring of the opinions of students and graduates on acquired learning outcomes and competences is becoming widely used, but is not fully developed yet" (SQAA, 2013, 16). At this stage of the

pilot research, one of the possible solutions for improving students' perception regarding their engagement in revision of study programmes could be including the students in the revision process of HEIs, their initiatives and opinions should be taken into consideration, and they should be treated as an equal partner.

In the last part we concentrate on the rationales for revision of the study programmes, student surveys and pedagogical excellence. Students' prevailing perception, based on the pilot results, is that the study programmes are revised due to the lack of sufficient financial resources (54.1 %). The second rationale for the revision of the study programmes are recommendations included in the student surveys (49,8 %), however it is interesting, that 36.8 % of student respondents do not agree with this opinion and 26.3 % students are undecided whether the student surveys are taken into consideration or not. Similar results can be observed regarding the trends in study disciplines which could represent the main drivers for revision of study programmes. 31.1 % of students say that the trends do not have an impact on revision of study programmes, but on the other hand 34.7 % of them are convinced that the trends have an impact and 34.2 % are undecided whether the trends in the study disciplines have an impact on revision of study programmes (or not). Similar conclusions connected to the austerity measures as the main driver for revision of study programmes are included also in the SQAA report where "the groups of experts noticed that certain measures were adopted that are questionable from the view of quality: fewer contact hours, less funds for the scientific-research and artistic work and fewer possibilities for promotion and career development". It is interesting, that regarding the student surveys, 40.2 % of students agree that they are reliable tool for evaluating the quality of the study programme, whereas the SQAA external evaluations showed that the response to the surveys is poor and the results not representative. Moreover, based on the SQAA report "the numerous self-evaluation reports of universities and their members do not evaluate the results of surveys (in particular for the area of student workload according to ECTS) and do not present the corresponding adopted measures" (SQAA, 2013, 16). Last but not least, 57.6 % of students are convinced that the academic staff are sufficiently included in pedagogical training, which is the opposite to the SQAA conclusions, where it is reported that "the possibilities of life-long learning and teaching training for higher education teachers are constantly developing, but their development is relatively modest in light of the findings from the previous assessments" (SQAA, 2013, 15). Therefore, the SQAA recommends, that "higher education institutions should provide better opportunities for teaching, didactic and professional training and different forms of life-long learning to their higher education teachers" (SQAA, 2013, 38). However, once again, concrete conclusions can not be drawn, since among questions and argument presented above, a really high percentage of the student respondents (7.9–19.4 %) did not know the answer or had no opinion, which is why all the questions and arguments presented in this section of the pilot questionnaire, should be discussed again and possibly rephrased in the way that will be more comprehensible to the wider student population.

Conclusions and recommendations for the improvement of the pilot research

Based on the review of the Slovenian legislation on HE and closer insight into the practices at the Slovenian HEIs retrieved by the SQAA external evaluations and also students' perception, opinions and views, based on the pilot questionnaire it can be indicated, that the legislation on HE indeed provides enough possibilities for students' engagement in QA procedures and in institutional governance and management, however in the practice there are some general deficiencies which could be emphasized.

More representative, realistic and concrete strengths and advantages, as well as the shortcomings and disadvantages of practices at the Slovenian HEIs could be gained and presented with the improvement of the questionnaire, taking into consideration the weaknesses and uncertainties, that were met with the pilot research. At the beginning, a larger sample size should be reached in a survey (at least 10 % of the student population) for the results to be representative for a target population, including the student representatives in different bodies and committees, as well as in a wider student population. Quite some questions/arguments, especially in the second and third section of the questionnaire, which covers students' engagement in quality monitoring and activities, leading to pedagogical excellence, should be reconsidered

and discussed again and possibly rephrased to acquire more understandable arguments/questions and widely applicable questionnaire. Last but not least, an additional option should be included in the questionnaire, namely verifying whether the questions related to quality assurance, improving university teaching and policy making aspects of HE are interesting to the students at all.

However, the following conclusions can be made in accordance to the pilot research presented above. Students are adequately represented in all governing bodies at HEIs, but in majority of committees students do not have their voting rights. One of the possible recommendations could be that the Higher Education Act foresees also this option (voting rights). Furthermore, students are not well informed about the work of the Student Councils and their representatives in the governing bodies. The recommendation associated with this finding is oriented to improve the cooperation between the students and their representatives in the governing bodies at the HEIs.

Further on, students should be more widely integrated in the revision and updating of the study programmes as this is the current practice. This requirement should not only be included in the Accreditation Criteria, but also in the Higher education Act. We agree with the SQAA recommendation that “the development of study programmes should be conditioned by an input of a new knowledge and by clear expectations of a wider circle of employers and students, and less by financial situation or availability of higher education teachers in terms of their fields”.

With regards to the pedagogical excellence the lack of a systematic trainings and workshops was observed at the national and at the institutional level as well. Also the respondents who participated in the study about *conditions of academic profession in Slovenia* expressed that they did not have sufficient opportunities and training courses in order to improve the quality of their teaching (Klemenčič, Flander & Žagar Pečjak, 2015, 8). Similar conclusions were made by the SQAA experts on a basis of external evaluations. Therefore, it is recommended that each Slovenian HEI should establish a special unit which would be focused on teaching methodologies, pedagogical techniques, development and assessment of innovative pedagogies, and curricula, etc. A slightly more ambitious recommendation is associated with the establishment of a special national centre or an academy which would be oriented towards the national enhancement and improvement of pedagogical excellence.

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