

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

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Abstract

Slovenian higher education (hereafter HE) legislation ensures that students are relatively well integrated in different evaluation procedures as well as in decision-making on the national and on the institutional level. However, the analysis of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency's (SQAA) 2013 report on quality in Slovenian higher education, which contains the evaluation of more than 100 reports, indicated that only one part of the students' population is directly integrated in the higher education development and quality assurance (QA) procedures prepared by the SQAA experts on a basis of external evaluations, site visits, and initial accreditation procedures of Slovenian study programs and higher education institutions (HEI), and a pilot research conducted among 422 students of Slovenian HEIs.

Keywords: student engagement, institutional governance, pedagogical excellence

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Introduction

The present paper presents the main focus of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency's (SQAA) 2013 report on quality in Slovenian higher education. It also surveys respondents' views, opinions, and perceptions in the context of students' engagement in creation and development of HE policy, (new) study programs and curricula, their engagement in different revision procedures of study programs and learning and teaching methods, as well as student surveys. In our conclusion the authors present the weaknesses and uncertainties that were met with the pilot research and recommend improvements.

Furthermore, we highlight deficiencies that should be addressed 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. We conclude with an ambitious recommendation for the establishment of a special national center or academy on pedagogical excellence.

At the European level, greater engagement of students across the whole of the higher education system, including student-centered learning (SCL) and quality teaching in general have increased in prominence over the past few decades in national and transnational debates. Examples include 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 at 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-centered learning,” which can take different forms with respect to different types of students (Geven & Attard, 2012), is an ongoing reflexive process, in which a constructive interaction and cooperation between students and staff, who are considered 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 must senior management be committed to capturing all the dimensions that affect quality teaching, but students must also be committed to providing feedback on curricula and teaching through evaluations (OECD, 2010, 5) and participating actively in different quality assurance procedures. As the OECD 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 also 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 a number of countries have recognized the need to widen the student participation in higher education, SCL has come to be viewed as a greater necessity (Geven & Attard, 2012). Nevertheless, 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), there is still no doubt that national quality assurance systems foster institutional involvement in supporting quality teaching. This might be overcome with national centers 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 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, the OECD (2010) reports that institutions are encouraged by external reviews to set up or reinforce internal quality assurance mechanisms by including quality teaching aspects, although measuring teaching quality is challenging. Therefore, some institutions have centers for the 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). We agree with those 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. Students collaboration through engagement in governing bodies, where they can participate in defining 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: (1) functional, where

benefits of the university are highlighted; (2) social, wherein society benefits and aspects are exposed; and (3) developmental, where students' benefits are stressed.

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), the student respondents included in the ESU survey, were not generally involved in the development of teaching and assessment methods. In the case of curriculum development, university respondents report that students are involved, mostly by being part of political bodies within the university. "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 evaluations of teaching, which provide a variety of benefits: 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 student evaluations of teaching instruments, which cover multidimensional aspects, literally measure effective teaching (Marsh 2007).

Student Engagement in Slovenian HE—the Legislative Aspect

The current legislation in the field of HE in the Republic of Slovenia mandates strong student engagement in the quality assurance (QA) procedures on the institutional as

well as the national level. Slovenian students are extensively engaged in different kinds of procedures, decision making, (student) evaluations of teaching and other activities provided by the HEIs.

The Slovenian Higher Education Act (OG RS 2014) and other legislative acts determine students' participation in different kinds of HEI procedures. Students have the right to participate through their representatives in the work and administration of HEIs. Thus student 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 since their representatives are included in a majority of governing bodies of HEIs, such as the Senate, Governing Board and Academic Board. In this context, a Student Council exists 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, the Senate consists of different commissions, on many of which students have representatives, i.e. the Commission for Quality, the Habilitation Commission etc. The Student Council also gives its opinion on the pedagogical qualifications of academic staff prior to promotion or tenure 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 public universities or private HEIs and in their governing boards. 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 have at least one student member. Furthermore, there is a special act that regulates the activity of the Slovenian Student

Union (SSU), considered an important stakeholder in the creation of the Slovenian higher education policy and consequently in changing and amending the HE legislation.

Pilot Study and Analysis of the SQAA Report

In accordance to the legislative situation 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. We therefore initiated a pilot research project to survey 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 student engagement in the following activities: preparing new study programs/curricula, forming new methods of teaching and learning, determining what their engagement in self-evaluation and revision procedures of study programs might be 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 titled "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 contains the meta 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. However, we strongly believe that even a pilot research with a small sample can provide some useful and interesting insights into the research questions outlined above.

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 concern the students' opinions regarding their engagement in the creation of new study programs/curricula, new methods of teaching and learning, and assessment and revision procedures of study programs. In the last part the focus will be on the rationales for revision of study programs, 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 the development of HE policy, it is interesting to note that a majority of student respondents does not feel strongly integrated in the creation and development of a HE policy (54.5 %). Moreover, they are even more certain that they are not treated equally 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," which is why the question/argument concerned should be reconsidered and rephrased.

Concerning students' impact on quality enhancement programs 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 university 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.

Student perceptions, in regard to their active engagement in creating new study programs/curricula, new methods of teaching, learning, assessment, and revision procedures of study programs are similar to the observations presented previously. Again, through the pilot questionnaire, we discovered that students feel very negatively about these issues. The majority of student respondents does not agree that they can be actively engaged in the creation of new study programs (50 %), new curricula (54.4 %), 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 programs. However, in the context of the pilot survey data presented, it has to be strongly emphasized that between 4.6 and 5.1 % of students decided for the option “I do not know/no opinion.” If, nevertheless, the conclusions gathered through this pilot research are compared with the conclusions offered by the SQAA report, it appears that “there has been a lack of wider integration of students in the evaluation and updating of study programs in the past. Within the framework of internal quality assurance systems, the initiatives to improve the contents of study programs and their implementation were not efficiently formally transferred from the initiators to the senates” (SQAA, 2013, 16). Moreover, the report states 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 our pilot research, one of the possible solutions for improving students’ perceptions regarding their engagement in revision of study programs might be including the students in the revision process of HEIs. In this way their initiatives and opinions should be taken into consideration, and they should be treated more as equal partners.

In this final section we concentrate on the rationales for revision of the study programs, student surveys, and pedagogical excellence. The students' prevailing perception, based on the pilot results, is that the study programs are revised due to the lack of sufficient financial resources (54.1 %). The second rationale for the revision of the study programs most consider to be recommendations included in the student surveys (49,8 %). However, it is interesting to note that 36.8 % of student respondents disagree with this opinion and 26.3 % students are undecided as to 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 programs. 31.1 % of students say that the trends do not have an impact on revision of study programs, but on the other hand 34.7 % of them are convinced that the trends have an impact and 34.2 % are undecided as to whether the trends in the study disciplines have an impact. Similar conclusions, suggesting that the austerity measures are the main driver for revision of study programs are included also in the SQAA report. It states that "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 to note regarding the student surveys that 40.2 % of students agree that they are a reliable tool for evaluating the quality of the study program, 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 believe 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 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, for didactic and professional training, and for different forms of life-long learning to their higher education teachers” (SQAA, 2013, 38). However, once again, concrete conclusions cannot be drawn from this study, since among the questions and argument presented above, a high percentage of the student respondents (7.9–19.4 %) did not know the answer or had no opinion. This is precisely 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.

Conclusion

Based on the review of the Slovenian legislation on HE and deeper insight into the practices at the Slovenian HEIs retrieved by the SQAA external evaluations, as well as students’ opinions and views, we suggest that the legislation on HE indeed provides enough possibilities for student engagement in QA procedures and in institutional governance and management. However, in practice there are some general deficiencies that could be emphasized.

More representative, realistic, and concrete information concerning 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. Here the pilot research should provide valuable guidelines. To start with, a larger sample size should be included 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. Especially in the second and third section of the questionnaire, which covers students' engagement in quality monitoring and activities leading to pedagogical excellence, the questions should be reconsidered and possibly rephrased. 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 pilot research presented above suggests the following conclusions. Students are adequately represented in all governing bodies at HEIs, but in majority of committees students do not have voting rights. One possible recommendation could be that the Higher Education Act also include 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 to improve the cooperation between the students and their representatives in the governing bodies at the HEIs.

Furthermore, students should be more widely involved in the revision and updating of the study programs than is currently the 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 programs should be conditioned by an input of new knowledge and by clear expectations of a wider circle of employers and students, and less by financial considerations or the availability of higher education teachers in terms of their fields."

With regards to pedagogical excellence, the lack of systematic training and workshops was observed at the national and at the institutional level as well. In addition, the respondents who participated in the study about *conditions of academic profession in Slovenia* stated that they did not have sufficient opportunities for training courses in order to improve the quality of their teaching (Klemenčič, Flander & Žagar Pečjak, 2015, 8). Similar conclusions were reached by the SQAA experts on a basis of external evaluations. Therefore, we recommend that each Slovenian HEI should establish a special unit 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 center or an academy that would be oriented towards the national enhancement and improvement of pedagogical excellence.

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