

Extended collegiality? The role of students in external quality assurance panels

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Research Domains

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Abstract

In Europe, students are often regular members of external quality assurance panels mandated to perform evaluations and accreditations in higher education. While their inclusion have been secured through the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (ESG), we have little knowledge about the roles students actually play in such panels. Based on a survey targeting students taking part in the European quality assurance processes, the current study provides new insights regarding student involvement and influence in a setting characterized by a high level of expertise and professionalism. Key findings show that students take on mixed roles in panels, that they feel respected and treated as equals. The findings are discussed in relationship to the students-as-partners literature, and it is argued that students balance different expectations and roles at the same time as they are interpreting their involvement as part of a collegial process.

Full paper

Introduction

Student involvement in quality assurance is an important, but understudied part of higher education (see, e.g. Klemencic, 2018). Existing studies have demonstrated that there are many national particularities and variations in the historical development of student involvement in quality assurance (Klemencic, 2018), and that student roles often have been secured through various forms of regulation (Stensaker & Matear, 2024).

What are possible roles for students in external quality assurance?

While securing a legal basis for student involvement in quality assurance can be seen as a key condition for their potential impact in this area, it is possible to identify different roles students may take in a quality assurance process. One role may be linked to students as key stakeholders in higher education, and that they are included as *representatives* of their

peer students. In this perspective, students are more stakeholders and advocates of their interests as a group (Klemencic, 2018). A second role could be linked to the unique insight of the students experience as learners. In this perspective students could take on a role as an *expert* on what it means to be a student, and the expertise that may emerge if students have taken part of several external quality assurance processes (Stensaker & Matear, 2024). Finally, one could also argue that students might enter into a role as a *partner* in the external quality assurance process (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). In this perspective, inclusion, engagement and trust are key elements where students are seen as equals in a more collegial setting (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019; Holen et al., 2021). In this paper, these roles will be applied as a heuristic for analyzing how students perceive their involvement and functions in quality assurance panels.

Data and methods

The paper is based on a survey targeting students that are included in the European Student Union (ESU) "pool" of student candidates appointed to external quality assurance panels. The European focus also means that the students targeted have experiences from different countries and settings. 35 students (of 90 members) responded to the survey of which 60 percent of the respondents had taken part in four or more external quality assurance panels. As such, the respondents could be said to have considerable experience from such panels.

Preliminary findings and discussion

Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that students in external quality assurance panels take on several roles. While they do take on a role as representatives, there is also a noticeable tendency for students to see themselves as equals and partners in the panel they are serving on – a view they claim is also held by other members of the same panel. Interestingly, almost half of the respondents also see themselves as experts. Our data also seem to suggest that the students are balancing several roles at once, but that they do it in ways that earn respect among their peer members in the panels they serve. As such, quality assurance processes seem to open up for arenas for dialogue and partnership between those involved. This finding links up to current debates about how student partnerships can be created and nurtured in higher education (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Holen et al., 2021), and that the engagement of students in contemporary higher education may stretch far beyond the more consumerist role they are often suspected to have (see also Jungblut et al. 2015).