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Student involvement in quality assurance: perspectives and practices towards persistent partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Students are, in some regions and countries in the world, one of the key stakeholders that are included in quality assurance processes, although their participation is missing in others. However, there is an increasing interest in including students in quality assurance processes, both internally at the institutional level and externally as part of the national and regional accreditations or evaluations of institutions or their educational offerings. This article identifies key practices and dilemmas when involving students in quality assurance and discusses the conditions facilitating a partnership with students in these processes. In the conclusion, it is argued for an approach where students are recognised as having expertise that is valuable in quality assurance.

KEYWORDS

Student-as-partners; external quality assurance; internal quality assurance; student engagement; student involvement

Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education is basically an activity safeguarding public spending and the interests of students (Stensaker, 2018), although students to a varying degree are involved in the quality assurance processes in different higher education systems (Matear *et al.*, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019; Tanaka, 2019; Hou *et al.*, 2022). In Europe and some other parts of the world, including Aotearoa New Zealand, students are involved in many different roles and positions, including on the governance boards of quality assurance agencies, in external evaluation panels and in a range of quality assurance practices and processes within universities and colleges (Abualrub & Stensaker, 2018; Holen *et al.*, 2021). In the US and in many countries in Asia, the involvement of students in quality assurance is more

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limited in scope and scale, although there are several initiatives underway to strengthen student participation in these regions (Boehme, 2017; Hou *et al.*, 2022). Although European models of quality assurance are often taken as inspiration for those wanting to pilot student involvement in quality assurance, there are many challenges concerning how the involvement of students in quality assurance should be designed and the implications of such involvement in different contexts (Naylor *et al.*, 2020).

While the participation of students for some is perceived as a natural component of quality assurance, it is for others far less obvious (Shils, 1997) and an example of downgrading expertise and academic competence. Cultural and academic traditions and the historic role students have played in many higher education systems are probably part of the explanations for the very different positions taken. Policy contexts matter (Hou *et al.*, 2022).

However, one could argue that the question of student involvement in quality assurance is not straight forward, as the concept of involvement is somewhat unclear: what does it mean to be involved? Are students involved if they merely respond to surveys or evaluations about their educational experience? Are students involved if they participate in evaluation panels, regardless of their influence on these panels? What degree of involvement is actually acceptable for stating that student involvement is fulfilled? While the concept of student involvement is associated with their formal inclusion in quality assurance processes, concepts such as student engagement and student partnerships point to the influence of students and how they are empowered by their involvement, suggesting that there are various models or perspectives for student involvement in quality assurance. The purpose of the current article is to explore this issue more in detail through the following two research questions:

- What are the current key practices and areas for student involvement in quality assurance?
- What are the critical issues to be considered when designing and determining student involvement in quality assurance?

Based on existing literature and studies, the article is meant as a conceptual and analytical contribution to the discussion about student involvement in quality assurance. The article is organised in three parts. In the next section, three different perspectives for understanding and categorising student involvement are outlined, followed by a short empirical description with illustrations from various countries and regions where different approaches for student involvement linked to the three perspectives are exemplified. The article then identifies key issues to be considered when deciding how and in what way students should be involved in quality assurance. Some final reflections about future practices are offered in the conclusion.

Three perspectives on student involvement in quality assurance

Student involvement in quality assurance is an important but relatively understudied part of higher education. There are, of course, noticeable exceptions to this neglect (Bergan *et al.*, 2004; Coates, 2005; Klemenčič, 2018; Naylor *et al.*, 2020) and the wider discourse on students as partners in education is also relevant (see, for example, the *Voices from the Field* section of the *International Journal for Students as Partners*). What existing studies have shown is that there are many national particularities and variations in the historical development of student representation in general, as well as the influence that students and their organisations have been able to achieve (Michelsen & Stensaker, 2011; Klemenčič, 2018, Tanaka, 2019). This issue is often related to the legal basis for student involvement and inclusion in higher education governance and core academic activities (Shils, 1997) and to the ability of students to organise and articulate their interests in powerful ways at the institutional and national level (Stensaker & Michelsen, 2012; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

Obviously, neither the legal basis for student involvement nor the ability of student organising is static and the many reforms of higher education in different countries have affected the role and position of students as an important stakeholder group (Olsen, 2007; Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Woelert & Stensaker, 2023). On this basis, it is possible to develop three perspectives or interpretations of what student involvement in quality assurance processes may imply.

In the first perspective, student involvement is primarily filtered through state intervention and state legislation (Woelert & Stensaker, 2023). This *legal approach* defines a formal space for student involvement, rights to participate in specific decision-making bodies and specifies student self-regulation as part of the governance system at the national or regional level. In Europe, this legislative approach is linked to the idea of the state as an integrating force, focused on the preparation and enforcement of law. The process of governing often takes place within the context of corporative networks and structures (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985). In this perspective, students are integrated into the political-administrative governance arrangements at institutional and national level (Michelsen & Stensaker, 2011). Student involvement is understood as a formal right. However, this model does impose limitations on the institution and on students about how they can participate.

In many countries, not least those characterised by de-regulation, competition between institutions for students and substantial institutional autonomy (or national reform efforts intended to strengthen these dimensions), it is possible to find evidence of securing student involvement through safeguarding their position as clients and sometimes even customers of higher education (Ewell, 2009; Jungblut *et al.*, 2015; Klemenčič, 2018). Examples of

turning students into clients or customers include voluntary student union legislation, which removes regulations that secure compulsory membership in student associations (Dixon *et al.*, 2024). Hence, a second perspective can be outlined where student involvement is secured through a *public interest approach*. In this perspective, the state takes a less dominant role and students (and their unions or associations) are perceived as external pressure groups representing the collective identities, interests and values of their members (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985; Gravett *et al.*, 2019). Student involvement is understood as securing stakeholder involvement in a market-like setting.

During the latter decade, it is also possible to note a growing interest in bringing students closer to the design and organisation of teaching and learning activities in higher education (Matear *et al.*, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019), including processes of quality assurance (Tanaka, 2019; Naylor *et al.*, 2020; Hou *et al.*, 2022). Hence, a third perspective can be identified based on the ambition to explore new ways in which student voices are included and taken seriously in improving educational offerings (Coates, 2005). While the arguments and logics for bringing students closer into the core processes of teaching and learning do vary (Holen *et al.*, 2021), this is basically a *partnership approach* where student involvement is understood as a relationship based on mutual trust. These trust-based relationships may be reinforced through the development of instruments such as partnership agreements or memoranda of understanding. As such, the students-as-partners approach provides a warning against quality assurance being too rigid and reinforcing static models at a time when students and the operating environments for universities are changing at ever-increasing rates.

While theoretically the differences between the perspectives are clear, the perspectives offered are not necessarily mutually exclusive and combinations of involvement based on legal frameworks, public interests or partnership approaches are indeed possible. For example, it is possible to argue that an approach where students are seen as 'partners' may incorporate both elements from a more legalistic and a more public interest perspective and that specific practices can develop where elements from each perspective co-exists (Mårtenson *et al.*, 2014).

The perspectives offered may assist in distinguishing the overarching key design choices when fostering more student involvement and they may also be helpful to categorise and understand how student involvement in quality assurance currently organised, as well as helping to develop future opportunities. The fact that the approaches are not mutually exclusive provides more opportunities for learning and sharing practices. However, the development of this typology also helps identify the strengths and limitations of the different design options.

Examples of current practices for including students in quality assurance processes

Turning to how students in different contexts are included in quality assurance processes, one could find various examples of practices that are linked to all three perspectives outlined above. In Europe, the development of the *European Standards and Guidelines* for quality assurance launched in 2005 and later revised (ENQA, 2015) have contributed to a strengthened focus on the legal approach for student involvement at both national and institutional level (Klemenčič, 2018). The process facilitating this legal emphasis has often taken place through the translation of more supranational generic standards and guidelines into 'hard law' at national and institutional level (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014), filtered by national quality assurance agencies and their need for legitimacy (Stensaker *et al.*, 2010).

In the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ENQA, 2015), student involvement in various quality assurance processes is explicitly mentioned in several of the standards, including;

- ESG Standard 1.3: Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.
- ESG Standard 2.2: ... Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.
- ESG Standard 2.4: External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s) ...
- ESG Standards 3.1: ... Agencies should involve stakeholders in their governance and work.

While the standards as such could be interpreted both from the more legalistic and public interest perspectives, allowing for rather flexible approaches taken at the national level, evidence does indicate that agencies themselves, over time, tend to apply approaches that are more associated with the legalistic perspective. A key driver here is the translation process to make sure they fulfil the criteria for membership in supranational organisations such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or for being recognised by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014). As a result, formal regulations exist in many European countries specifying the inclusion of students in the formal governance body of the national quality assurance agencies as part of evaluation or accreditation committees at both national and institutional level.

In other jurisdictions, this legal approach can be seen in requirements for student membership of the governing bodies of institutions. For example, in

Aotearoa New Zealand, the relevant legislation specifies that the council of an institution should include at least one student 'who is enrolled at the institution' and 'whom the students of the institution have elected to represent them' (Education and Training Act 2020, S 278 (3) (b)).

However, it is also possible to identify many ways to foster student involvement in quality assurance that are more related to a public interest perspective. One example is related to how information from students as clients and consumers of education is being integrated into the evaluation and quality assurance procedures at national and institutional levels. This could take place through student evaluation systems at the institutional level (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014) or through large national student surveys where students are invited to respond to evaluations operating with pre-defined understandings of quality or national and institutional student satisfaction surveys (Jungblut *et al.*, 2015, 2021; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). These initiatives are not necessarily initiated and organised by public authorities and are often conducted by third-party organisations, private companies or newspapers (Ewell, 2009).

This information-seeking approach has over time extended to gathering data from students in the design of new qualifications or services. Information from other stakeholders, for example, employers, is also important. However, it is worth noting that under the information-seeking approach or the public interest approach that student perspectives may not be dominant.

One of the challenges with information seeking practices reflective of the public interest approach is that students may perceive them to be of little value in contributing in this way. It is sometimes unclear how their information is to be used and what changes as a consequence. This is a heightened concern for marginalised and underserved groups of students, who are also often more time poor than other students. Hou *et al.* (2022) have recently demonstrated that in the Asian context, students are often considered clients or more tokenistic participants in quality assurance processes and that their involvement is less broad with respect to roles and responsibilities in the quality assurance process.

The public interest perspective is closely linked to a range of national reform initiatives aimed at deregulating higher education and stimulating the development of a higher education sector more characterised by market-orientation and competition for students. A basic idea here is to clearly separate universities and colleges as providers of education and students as consumers of education (Naylor *et al.*, 2020).

There are also empirical examples of initiatives taken to involve students in ways that better fit the student-as-partner perspective. In Europe, an often-referred case is the Sparqs ('Student partnerships in quality Scotland')

initiative in Scotland. Sparqs was formed in 2003, gained charitable status in 2015 and has been supported by the Scottish Funding Council as a broad national initiative aimed at supporting students, institutions and the whole higher education sector in stimulating student involvement in quality assurance at different levels in the Scottish higher education system. The public charity that has been set up to facilitate Sparqs offers training for students wanting to take on various roles in quality assurance processes, as well as practical advice and guidance for institutions wanting to strengthen student involvement. A key characteristic of Sparqs is the continuous dialogue with key stakeholders in higher education through workshops, conferences and training events, allowing for diverse arenas for student involvement. The different activities initiated provide a pipeline for student talent to take on a stronger and more active role in quality assurance processes in general (Varwell, 2021).

The interesting approach in Sparqs is that the agency does not impose particular forms of student involvement, although there are clear ideas about how involvement may lead to engagement and eventually partnership. The approach taken is to facilitate a process where staff, students and institutions create their own designs and practices for how partnerships should be defined and understood. While Sparqs does not operate with a predefined understanding of what partnership is, which differentiates it from being a legalistic approach, the agency does provide various tools and visualisations for embedding the discussion (Varwell, 2021). As an example, Sparqs developed early on a 'staircase' demonstrating the different roles students could take on in a quality assurance process, ranging from being merely an information provider to eventually evolving into becoming a partner in the process and being involved in authentic and constructive dialogues between key stakeholders.

The influence of Sparqs's model of student involvement in quality assurance can be seen across the world (Bovill *et al.*, 2021). Comparing the various empirical illustrations for involving students in quality assurance, the examples all indicate that the theoretical perspectives on student involvement offered are overlapping in practice. For example, the various student roles in the 'staircase' developed by Sparqs indicate student roles ranging from being firmly embedded in a partner perspective to roles (albeit not that preferred) where the public interest perspective is most relevant. In settings where legal and public interest perspectives dominate, it is also possible to find examples of countries where these perspectives are combined with change and development ambitions where students are important change drivers, for example in external evaluation panels (Matear *et al.*, 2018).

These examples of how theoretical constructs are blurred in practice fit well with studies demonstrating that student roles in quality development

and quality assurance processes are not static but very dynamic, unpredictable and potentially transformative, reflecting the on-going changes in the field of quality assurance (Holen *et al.*, 2021; Dzimińska, 2023; Elken & Stensaker, 2023; Vettori, 2023). This may imply that students that are enrolled in quality assurance practices based on more legal approaches potentially could be part of a transformation into a partnership approach, although the opposite is also possible: that students invited into a setting intended to be a partnership could end up in quite different roles, such as an information provider with little say in decisions about direction.

Key issues and pointers in designing student involvement in quality assurance

The dynamics of student involvement suggest that design choices and dilemmas with respect to how students are (should be) involved in quality assurance processes need to be discussed, revisited and perhaps even adjusted continuously in quality assurance processes. The danger of sticking to static designs and rigid practices is less added value of the process. The following section illustrates this by highlighting some of the key issues that have been identified in the student-as-partner literature (Matthews, 2017; Naylor *et al.*, 2020; Bovill *et al.*, 2021; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Within the field of quality assurance, a classic discussion with respect to design is how to balance accountability and improvement-oriented purposes and practices (Ewell, 2009; Jungblut *et al.*, 2015; Stensaker, 2018; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022; Vettori, 2023). The need for a balance is rooted in the argument that too much accountability will have a damaging effect on improvement-oriented processes, while too much focus on improvement and local concerns can damage external legitimacy (Ewell, 2009). However, as demonstrated in the US by Ewell (2009), while accountability and improvement are a continuous debate, how it spells out in practice may vary over time as demands for accountability increase while new opportunities for improvement-oriented actions are also multiplying due to technological advancements. Nor are the roles and priorities of key stakeholders static.

This issue is also of high importance concerning student involvement in the process, as more recent accountability-oriented quality assurance designs tend to be more formal and structured with less room for flexibility and adaptation. Hence, accountability-oriented designs will normally imply a type of involvement where students (and also other members of external evaluation panels) are assigned more specified tasks to be conducted, leaving less room for the students to take on a role as co-creators in the process (Bovill *et al.*, 2021).

The overarching purpose of the quality assurance system could also have implications for the selection of students to take part in the process. In short,

who are the students we invite into the process speaking for, should they be elected among their peer students or selected and appointed by those in charge of quality assurance (Bovill, 2017; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023)? For Matthews and Dollinger (2023), it is important to distinguish between student partnership and student representation. Partnership is for them considered to be more aligned with a pedagogy with shared responsibility, while representation provides for student voice(s) in academic governance, including quality assurance, and at times wider decision-making. They refer to participation in quality assurance activities and processes primarily under the auspices of representation and suggest this is a more static approach that offers less opportunity to explore change in higher education. If we relate this to the accountability-improvement distinction, a representation approach seems more likely to appear under an accountability régime that tends to be driven by a logic of transparency and fairness and is more aligned with the legalistic and public interest perspectives identified earlier. The dilemma to be handled is that a design intended to strengthen transparency and fairness may produce outcomes that are less relevant to students, thus weakening the legitimacy of the whole process.

From a quality assurance perspective, the idea of students as experts offers an interesting alternative, as student experts on audit panels are not expected to speak for other students but have a role in bringing a particular perspective to an audit panel (as an industry or professional body member might). While student members of audit panels work with and add value to peers, the extent to which quality assurance could constitute a learning partnership depends on many other factors.

The point of departure is that students add value to quality assurance activities by bringing an expert perspective of how it is to be a student involved in a learning process, bridging pedagogical designs, and how these are interpreted and acted upon by students. Hence, students bring a unique and different kind of expertise to the quality assurance process. They are not subject experts, but they are experts on the learning process from a student perspective. This starting point may also add additional value to the students involved. Uludağ et al. (2021) suggested that students in Turkey participate in quality assurance processes also because they want to contribute to increasing student participation [in academic quality], gain professional development opportunities and improve the quality of education. These motivations apply to other panel members as well, but other panel members may benefit further in terms of professional development and even career recognition. Professional development and career opportunities for students may apply in larger systems, but this is likely to be limited and probably not curated in other systems. Retaining student members of audit panels in universities and within quality assurance agencies might have positive

implications for developing academic quality experience in early career academics (noting, of course, that not all students or early career academics are young people).

The concept of students as experts may also bring other benefits to the quality assurance process, for example, in overcoming the insider *versus* the outsider dilemma. Holdsworth (2021) suggested that being inside the system (as part of a quality assurance process) means accepting an incremental approach to change and avoiding confrontation. Being outside the system allows for a more radical critique, but at the price of reduced influence. A potential risk with thinking of students as partners in quality assurance is that they, in line with a lot of thinking in the students-as-partners literature (Matthews, 2017; Gravett *et al.*, 2019), will be embedded in more micro-oriented processes of continuous improvement of quality. The challenge is that, in quality assurance, the participating students are probably not the partners themselves. Due to the nature of the quality assurance process, there are limits to student participation (Naylor *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, the concept of students as experts offers space for students to explore the challenge of being either insiders or outsiders to the process. It provides a new dynamic role for students where they are not restricted to act as a data source, a consumer or as an interest representative. As the expert role is to consider, discuss and challenge the *status quo* of systems and procedures related to quality work, it allows the students more flexibility and agility to respond to issues arising during the quality assurance process. Of course, such a role does place demands on the design of the process. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) have strongly argued for carefully distinguishing between student representation and student partnership. Student partners are not representative for other students and student partnerships should not undermine elected student representative systems. Both have important roles. While acknowledging the importance of this distinction, these roles could also lead to incrementalism and the risk of being too embedded in pre-defined roles. The concept of a student as an expert could represent a more dynamic approach to balancing the insider-outsider dilemma. It could also afford the opportunity for new models of student-led evaluations of quality. There are some initial examples of student-led evaluations in practices, for example, student awards for excellence in teaching.

Reflections and conclusions

Quality assurance is always embedded in contexts where issues of power and interests are omnipresent and the three initial perspectives on student involvement in quality assurance provide three different views on how these issues are resolved. In the legalistic perspective, power issues are handled

through including students in the process, although their influence and impact during the process may be more limited. In the public interest perspective, a similar approach is taken; students are allowed to have a voice, to be heard and articulate their interests, but the role they are assigned is often that as a client or consumer without having a say in the kind of actions that should be taken following their input. The student-as-partners perspective has a different take on issues of power and interest articulation, as students are allowed to be included in the process and even have a say in what potential actions should be taken. However, there are also risks associated with the latter perspective and, as has been argued, a partnership approach to quality assurance may embed students in taken-for-granted procedures and processes, leading to less radical change. The concept of students as experts may provide a constructive extension of the partnership perspective, also taking into account that students are a diverse interest group without the group as such having unified interests (Jungblut *et al.*, 2015; Klemenčič, 2018; Tanaka, 2019).

Given the uneven state of student involvement in quality assurance in many parts of the world, there are most likely contexts where ideas about student partnership are not likely to be considered or implemented in the near future. Here, legalistic or public interest approaches could have more appeal as they secure students' involvement, although the roles are often pre-defined, leaving students out of other parts of the process. While the latter approaches may have limitations, they still allow for some degree of student involvement in quality assurance, not least by facilitating a clearer role for students in advocating for student rights and student views. For students not formally included in quality assurance processes, the alternative could be more *ad hoc* student activism, which could be far more challenging for both higher education institutions and national authorities to tackle, or even more disengagement by students and missed opportunities for working towards quality improvement in a more systematic way.

However, the student as expert concept could potentially also be relevant in quality assurance designs embedded in more legalistic and public-interest perspectives. In the Sparqs partnership staircase model, there are four categories of student involvement: from being an information provider, an actor, an expert and finally a partner (Varwell, 2021). Why the role of students as 'experts' is subordinated to that of a 'partner' in this implicitly hierarchical approach could still be questioned. Expertise can contribute at multiple levels and may, at times, be preferred to partnership. As quality assurance is dependent on expertise as a key basis for the assessment of educational provision, a clear role for students as experts would actually put them on more equal terms with other types of expertise in the process and allow them to have a say in follow-up initiatives and actions.

Regardless of which perspective or model student involvement is based on, a student-as-expert role is dependent on building capacity for increased student competence in quality assurance (Stensaker, 2021). A key issue here would be to develop structures allowing for systematic learning even in quality assurance designs where learning is less valued, for example, in designs where more accountability-oriented purposes are prioritised (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). By building up students as experts, more dynamic and transformative learning processes could be facilitated and, as in other structures of expertise, an autonomous and persistent knowledge structure could be established, which could be the basis for a balanced partnership. The point is less on how students in academic quality can effect change but more on whether academic quality can effect change (and how students might contribute to this) (Mårtenson *et al.*, 2014). Within the European Students Union (ESU), an expert pool of students involved in quality assurance processes was established back in 2009, continuously organising study sessions and workshops where the knowledge accumulated over time is nurtured. Similar kinds of structures developed by students and for students could facilitate a much-needed knowledge base embedding persistent student partnerships in quality assurance in various settings around the world.

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