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## Students' views on dialogue: improving student engagement in the quality assurance process

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### ABSTRACT

The university-student partnership during the quality assurance process has gained considerable attention in policy documents as well as in the research into higher education. An effective dialogue is critical for engaging students in continuous improvement of higher education. Therefore, this qualitative study explored how student engagement in the quality assurance process can be improved by an effective university-student dialogue. Based on interviews carried out with 27 students, the study concluded that students were eager to take part in the quality assurance process. However, the students' understanding of what the university expects from them, their roles and responsibilities, should be made clear in order to effectively involve students in the quality assurance process. Students are seeking interaction: they would like to be engaged in the dialogue, collaboratively solve the issues concerning their studies, provide feedback and receive up-to-date information about the universities' development plans.

### KEYWORDS

Quality assurance; student engagement; university-student dialogue

## Introduction

Although engaging students in quality assurance is strongly recommended by various policy papers (Communique, 2003), studies show that students are not fully accepted as partners in the process (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011) and engaging students in quality improvement remains formal rather than substantive (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). Even if such changes are introduced, universities may fail to communicate the results of these changes to students which makes them sceptical and reluctant to participate in the quality assurance process (Powney & Hall, 1998; Harvey, 2003).

Engaging students as important, equal and responsible players in the education process evidently impacts on their learning and motivation, increases their sense of belonging as well as builds trust and confidence in the university-student partnership (McCulloch, 2009; Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Marquis *et al.*, 2017). Student engagement at partnership level requires them to be constantly active where

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students are referred to as consultants rather than informants of the quality development process (Carey, 2013). Once engaged, students turn into active participants in the education process, which consequently makes them more responsible for the quality of education provided at the university (McCulloch, 2009). Moreover, students' engagement in the quality assurance process positively influences students' learning and development and makes them more motivated in their own learning process (Kuh, 2009; Gvaramadze, 2011; Kumpas-Lenk *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, the university should communicate to the students their roles and responsibilities in the quality assurance process throughout the whole period of their studies and especially during the first year at the university (Krause & Coates, 2008; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). Students' awareness of their roles and responsibilities in co-creating high-quality education will keep them engaged in their studies. Therefore, this paper aims to find out how to improve student engagement in the quality assurance process by improving the dialogue between the university and students.

### **Theoretical background**

The quality and quality assurance in higher education have been broadly discussed. While Harvey and Green conceptualised 'quality' in 1993, the quality assurance processes was slow to improve in higher education institutions (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019) until the Bologna Process reinforced these changes (Gvaramadze, 2008). Harvey and Green (1993) conceptualised 'quality' as 'exception', 'perfection', 'fitness for purpose', 'value for money' and 'transformation quality'. The number of definitions of quality assurance puts forward the idea of compliance between requirements, standards and achieved results (Borahan & Ziarati, 2002), whereas some authors see it as a process of consequent actions of monitoring, assessing and improving quality. Definitions carry managerialism (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001) leaving out the concept of 'quality' identified by Harvey and Green (1993) as 'transformative'. The 'transformative' concept of quality, requiring higher education to enhance or empower student experiences, is the central concept of this paper.

Although, student engagement is seen more widely, as 'a broad construct' that covers students' academic and non-academic experiences (Coates 2007, p. 122), the idea of how student engagement in the instruction process improves their learning is more elaborated. Earlier research confirms that student engagement has a direct impact on the quality of student learning and personal development (Coates, 2005; Carini *et al.*, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Kuh (2009) saw engagement as students' time and effort devoted to activities leading to desired outcomes and the efforts of a higher education institution to persuade students to take part in these activities. Both parties of the education process carry responsibilities: students

as major participants are engaged in university activities and universities have an obligation to create the conditions necessary for such engagement.

Carey (2013) emphasised that not only direct instruction in the class but also students' engagement in out-of-class activities contributes to their learning. If students are engaged in a wider variety of activities, then they become thoughtful learners, this 'critical engagement' is important for achieving quality improvements (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 232). When students are involved in different committees and teams to assure quality, they have an opportunity to enrich their learning experience and gain new insights in the management of educational processes. Students will learn about peculiarities of quality provision and will become even more engaged in their studies. In this paper, students are considered as partners of the learning process where they are responsible for their own learning, as well as enhancing the quality of the studies at the university in general.

Several pre-conditions should be considered when building the quality assurance process where students are actively involved. The growing trust between students and academia is one of the primary benefits of student engagement in the quality assurance process (Gvaramadze, 2011). Williams (2016) indicated that students and staff working together contribute to quality improvement. Even if changes are institutional and university heads could consider that students do not have significant knowledge to take part in management processes at the institutional level, students are the ones most affected by the changes. Therefore, according to Luescher-Mamashela (2013) students should be part of the decision-making process and need to be involved in the change processes at university. The way universities involve them influences the university-student partnership. Traditional quality assurance, consisting of four repetitive steps, 'Plan-do-check-act', also known as Deming cycle, is an iterative process that requires a systematic feedback collection (Deming, 1986; Kettunen, 2011). Thus, student involvement should be considered at every stage, not only in the checking phase derived from the feedback surveys.

Contemporary quality assurance, where the roles and responsibilities of students and universities are clearly stated, is based on the concept that students are equal partners who share the responsibility for the quality of higher education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). Universities can benefit if student engagement is sought not because it is a requirement of today's quality assurance processes but because the university sees students as potential partners, who need to be informed and engaged in the preparation and implementation of these changes. For the partnership to work, students need to feel that their ideas are taken seriously, and their feedback makes a difference to the quality of education that the university provides. Second, when students feel that they are involved in the process and invited to make decisions as equal partners, they also take on more responsibility (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Stalmeijer *et al.*, 2016). If students are not accepted by university

leadership as equal partners, this decreases motivation and creates distrust (Love & Miller, 2003).

Students are willing to be part of the quality assurance process if they are well-informed and confident that changes will follow (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). As indicated by Bovill *et al.* (2016), it is crucial to communicate effectively in order to encourage students to participate in co-creation. To avoid student alienation, communication should be in the form of dialogue that is carried out at different levels: between students and university leadership; students and academic staff; and students and non-academic staff. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggested that students still want to have feedback from academics in the form of discussion, which proves that dialogue at different levels is critical to meeting students' needs and encouraging them to become more engaged in the quality assurance processes.

Fruitful university-student dialogue can improve student engagement, student satisfaction, performance indicators and university-student cooperation. This article looks at how to encourage student engagement in the quality assurance process and how to improve the dialogue between the university and students by seeking answers to the following questions. (1) What are students' experiences with the existing internal quality assurance process? (2) What are the pre-conditions for a dialogue that improves student engagement in the quality assurance process?

## Methodology

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with students from different study programmes of one Estonian university. The university, which has more than 8000 students, constantly monitors its outcomes and implements the four phases quality assurance cycle in internal self-evaluation.

Qualitative research design was used in an attempt to identify the factors affecting student engagement. Since it is 'situational and dynamic' it is hard to investigate. Nevertheless, qualitative study makes it possible to look at student engagement by exploring participants' perspectives, and by looking at what is meaningful for the participants within the context of internal quality assurance (Flick, 2014). According to qualitative research design we planned the data gathering methods as well as the data analysis method in a circular way, because it forces researchers to reflect on the research process and sheds light on the following process. We gathered data with semi-structured interviews as a method for targeted communications to capture different viewpoints. Data analysis based on qualitative content analysis helps to explore meanings and their contextual aspects (Flick, 2014). Participants' perspectives were important in understanding how they perceive the reality of student engagement in quality assurance processes (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

## Research design

The research consisted of two stages. The results of the first stage inspired us to develop the second stage, in order to find an explanation to the problems raised during the first stage (Figure 1).

In the first stage, semi-structured interviews focused on how students experienced the existing quality assurance processes at the university. Giving the fact that students are the key stakeholders in improving the quality of studies, it was important to determine how they perceive their engagement in the quality assurance of teaching and learning. Therefore, the guiding idea of the interviews was to collect the issues that students had experienced in teaching and learning process and to link them with the internal quality assurance processes. The leading interview question was: what are the main problems from the students' perspective in the teaching and learning process and its sub-processes from admission until graduation? The questions were not limited to the main topic, so that students would also feel comfortable expressing their thoughts about other topics relevant to the teaching and learning process. The four main questions asked during the interviews were the following: (1) the changes they want to implement at the university; (2) the main problems they have experienced during their studies; (3) the problems students discuss among themselves; (4) the initiatives they expect from the university.

Five focus group interviews were conducted by one researcher from February to April 2018. The groups consisted of two to five students. Altogether, 22 students, aged 20–45 (average age being 27), participated in the study, 6 of them male and 16 females. The participants represented different study areas: arts ( $n=3$ ), humanities ( $n=6$ ), educational sciences ( $n=5$ ), natural sciences ( $n=3$ ), social sciences ( $n=3$ ) and IT ( $n=2$ ). The year of study varied from first to seventh year; 13 participants were Bachelor's level and 9 were Master's level

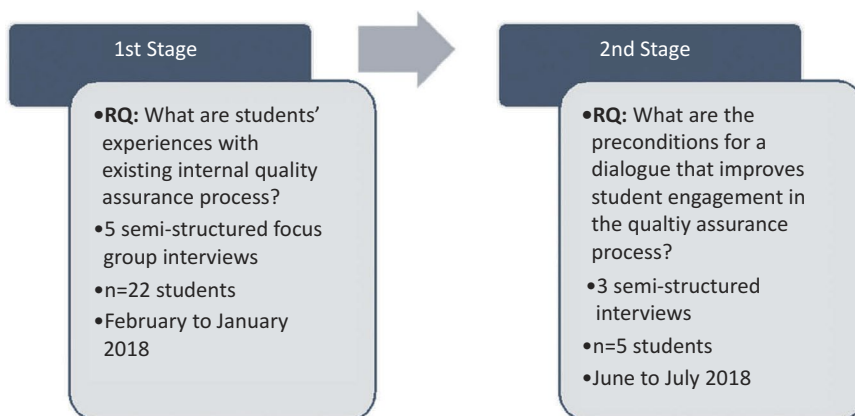


Figure 1. Research design and research questions (hereafter RQ)

students. Nine students had been members of the University Student Union or student representatives in the university's decision-making bodies. No international students were involved in the first stage. The average time of each interview was 76 minutes.

In the second stage, the data were also collected using semi-structured interviews. The leading questions of the second stage covered four major topics based on how the university-student dialogue takes place during the change process. (1) How do the students participate in the change processes? (2) In what ways does the university communicate with students? (3) How effective are the means of communication? (4) If the change they are asking for is not taking place, what do they do?

The interviews were carried out by the second researcher with five students during the period from June to July 2018. The variability of the sample was ensured by including both men (2) and women (3), as well as local (3) and international students (2) from different subject areas (three from educational sciences and two from multimedia sciences). The sample consisted of students of different ages (17–29), different study levels (Bachelor's and Master's), and included students with activist experience ( $n=2$ ), which guaranteed the diversity of perspectives on the issue.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. When the data were as transcribed, the students were coded to provide anonymity.

## Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in strict verbatim so that the researchers would not miss any valuable and meaningful ideas of the students. The transcriptions were read several times by two researchers individually. Then, the transcriptions were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The text interpretation followed the research questions and the categories were formed and carefully revised within the process of analysis (Mayering, 2000). Inductive thematic coding was implemented; the researchers used open coding and experimented with categories and their properties. The process of constant comparison allowed the data to be grouped and divided into categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Ezzy, 2002).

In the first stage of analysis, which consisted of four phases, the data were analysed using the quality assurance cycle. First, the researchers defined and agreed on the problems of quality assurance in the teaching and learning process addressed by the students. Second, these problems were connected to the four quality assurance phases (plan, do, check, act). Third, the codes of the meanings were discussed by two researchers until the shared meaning was agreed upon. In the final phase, the similar meanings were grouped and named.

In the second stage of the data analysis, the two researchers analysed the data separately and inductively identified meaningful thematic units about

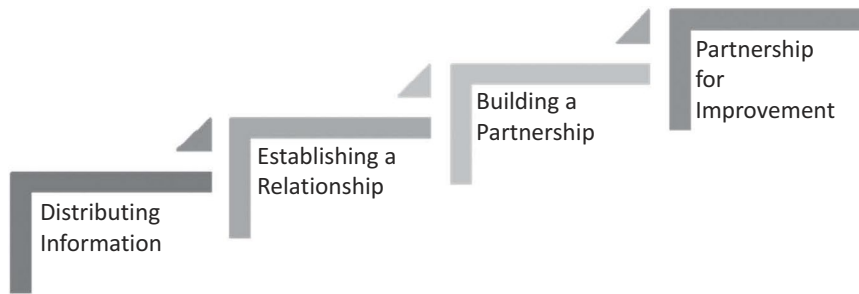


Figure 2. Categories of the second stage of data analysis

student-university dialogue. This was followed by discussions between the researchers together with the preliminary analysis. After discussions, the following categories were determined as pre-conditions for improving a dialogue for better student engagement: (1) distributing information; (2) establishing a relationship; (3) building a partnership; (4) partnership for improvement (Figure 2). Additionally, the data were analysed to explore what the pre-conditions are for a dialogue that improves student engagement in the quality assurance processes.

In order to improve the validity and reliability of findings of the study, the data of the second stage of analysis were re-analysed (Golafshani, 2003). After that, the interviews from the first stage of the research were re-analysed using the main categories of the second stage of data analysis. This iterative analysis revealed that the pre-conditions for student engagement can be grouped according to the main categories; however, these categories were improved and additional pre-conditions for each category were defined.

## Results

### *Students' experiences with existing internal quality assurance of teaching and learning process*

Looking at how to support student engagement in the quality assurance process, the aim was to map students' experiences with the current issues in teaching and learning and how these issues have been reflected in the existing quality assurance processes at the university.

Students experienced various problems at every phase of quality assurance and they indicated that most of the issues were at the planning phase. The categories of the problems at every phase are described in Figure 3.

Regarding the planning phase, students' emphasised problems, such as poor communication, bad timing, unclear goals, low competence of teaching staff and low integration of study programmes. For example, the timing problems of the changes and reforms at the university occur as intensive schedules make it



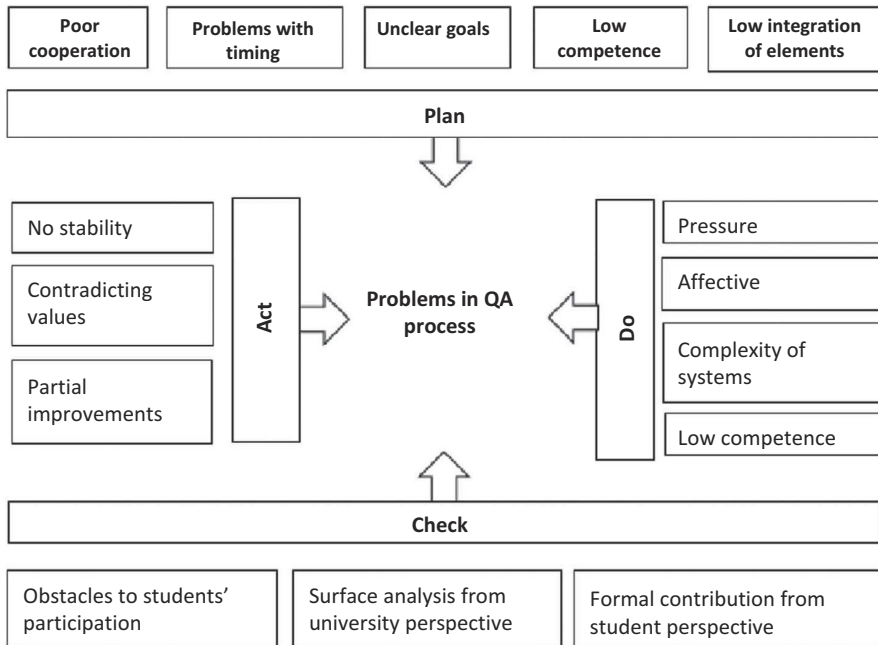


Figure 3. Problem that students' have experienced in quality assurance process

difficult to stay within the universities' deadlines. This reduces the quality of decision-making and limits discussion. In the planning phase, students mentioned cases where they had perceived low competence and overestimation of university capacity. Students expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of co-operation between the teachers and units and its effect on the integration of the study programme, teaching and learning. The interviews also revealed that although changes had been implemented their objectives were unclear to students.

Concerning the do-phase of the quality assurance cycle, the students perceived problems like complexity of systems, low competence, affective reactions and pressure. The time pressure negatively influenced students' attitudes towards the changes and reforms initiated at the university as well as their approach to learning. For example, students reflected that despite the revised deadlines for the supervision, the beginning of the writing phase of the graduation thesis was still vague and loose.

Many of us chose a topic and supervisor so that it could be done quickly and without any problems. So, we actually didn't have a chance to think or analyse our interest.

Thus, they were forced to take on more tasks from the course requirements rather than participate in university life in other ways. In the interviews, the students also expressed their concerns about the vague quality assurance of teaching and learning at the university compared to that of other institutions. Students said that they often faced exceedingly complicated support systems,

which turned out to be more a means to an end rather than a quality assurance issue. They also noted in the interviews that they had experienced negative affective reactions from the involved academic staff members who were responsible for the improvement of teaching and learning process. Students mentioned cases when teachers expressed negative attitude to students' complaints regarding additional workload (more than officially required) in the joint study programme and refused to change course assignments.

The problems described by the students at the check-phase of the quality assurance process can be grouped as obstacles to students' participation, surface analysis from the universities' perspective and formal contribution from the students. Several of those obstacles narrowed the possibilities for the students to propose improvements as the quality assurance system was not created in a way that would invite students to give constant constructive feedback. Irrelevant elements of the feedback system were mentioned as an example of that kind of obstacle to students' participation. For instance, the student feedback system is designed in a way that students cannot continue planning the next semester study load without filling in certain number of course feedback questionnaires. Moreover, students said that feedback questions are not distinct from each other and they are not motivated to answer similar questions several times while filling in the same questionnaire. This can lead the students to give artificial responses, which will not reflect their opinion of what needs to be improved.

I can understand and accept the meaning of feedback. But the problem is in the answers. We don't fill it in fairly. We want to have it done as much is required from us by the IT system and get the access to the next module of planning the study load for the next semester.

The students admitted that their attitude to feedback surveys in the IT system or panel discussions is superficial and they are not motivated to substantiate their opinions. The students also acknowledged in the interviews that results of feedback surveys can be inadequate and unreliable for making managerial judgements. From the university perspective, there are not enough resources invested into analysing students' feedback, so the results are not appropriate to consider or discuss publicly. As a result, students have noticed some negative developments in these aspects which used to be satisfactory. For instance, responding to students' complaints in a personal and operative way has decreased rather than increased. Thus, it can be concluded that the quality assurance in the check-phase is more formal.

The problems in the act-phase of the quality assurance cycle were described as partial improvements, contradicting values and little stability. Students consider improvements partial because of the rigidity of processes at the university. Little or no influence of students' opinions at the operational level was noticed:

They [teachers] also said, that we can't change anything. Why can't you change it?! You can currently change it and make it happen differently. It can be an extra workload. But this attitude was a disappointment for us.

The interviews revealed that partial improvements have been made and institutional development is taking place only on the surface. It seems that management adopts contradictory values when they talk about balancing different viewpoints, as in practice, they prefer uncomplicated and smooth changes and thus the improvements are only temporary. As a result, the students feel that there is little stability, changes are superficial and the possible consequences of those changes have not been analysed from the viewpoints of other stakeholders.

In conclusion, the problems with the student experience of the quality assurance cycle could be changed by means of a more skilful and effective dialogue. The problems in the quality assurance process occur when the information is insufficient or contradictory. Students feel their participation is limited by having to meet formal requirements set internally by the university management or externally by the accreditation body; they do not expect to be involved in discussions or treated as equal partners in the improvement processes.

### **Pre-conditions for effective dialogue**

The second stage of the study continued looking at the pre-conditions for a dialogue that would improve the students' engagement in the quality assurance process. From the analysis, four categories of consecutive activities had emerged: (1) distributing information; (2) establishing a relationship; (3) building a partnership; (4) partnership for improvement (Figure 2).

#### ***Distributing information***

Distributing information is the first step to building an atmosphere of trust and open relationship for engaging students. It emerged from the data that the following aspects played a role in distributing information: the means of communication, trustworthiness of information, targeting the communication and efficient time scheduling.

The university mainly communicates with students by email, but the information distributed this way is not targeted and, therefore, ineffective:

There is so much information everywhere, it is just a text, the emails don't mean anything, 80–90% of them are not meant for you. . . . I receive many emails, they are long, I never read them. If I receive an email from any of our study consultants, I understand that it is important.

This illustrates that the communication is not well-considered, which in turn influences the trust in the information sent, especially when students are

overloaded with information. The students emphasised throughout the interviews that they want the information sent to them to be trustworthy.

Messages from an official source and the length of the message would capture their interest. If the message is too long, which happens quite often, then they tend to skip it. The students also emphasised that they would like to get the information from the heads of the university, as it makes the information even more acceptable for them:

If an authority comes, that you respect, feel close to, that will be definitely better. If the Rector comes to the class and says there is something going on . . . . Then we say, if the Rector says it, we will look at it.

Students indicated that when it comes to distributing information, efficient timing is a key pre-condition for achieving better student engagement. By efficient timing the students meant that distributing information by the university can be irrelevant, if it reaches students too early or too late. Untimely sent information reduces students' attention to and interest in any messages sent by the university.

Students seek information using modern technology. They also value human interaction when receiving significant information, even if they are technologically savvy. The more complicated a problem is, the more significant the changes are; and an effective channel of communication would mean that complicated problems are handled better in a face-to-face situation (Swaab *et al.*, 2012).

### ***Establishing a relationship***

In establishing a relationship, the readiness for continuous collaboration, communication competence and face-to-face interaction are important aspects. When students receive clear and timely information and engage in communication with academic and non-academic staff, then they also tend to engage in a dialogue to provide feedback. This pre-supposes that all parties are ready for collaboration:

The communication within universities is still one-sided, which means that universities tell us what they have done, whereas they should be asking us what we want them to change.

The university has the responsibility for developing the staff to be ready for wider collaboration with students. Also, students' communication competences are important for engaging in a dialogue.

Establishing the student-university dialogue requires that the students know the university structure and processes:

In the beginning you do not know the system, who are the study advisers and what are their tasks. You do not know who to turn to. You only dare to ask anything from these familiar faces from the admission period.

Students experience obstacles in starting the dialogue if they are not familiar with how the university is operated, who are the key persons, and when and how to raise questions and make recommendations.

### ***Building a partnership***

Another necessary pre-condition is building a partnership and it requires meaningful involvement, interaction at different levels and collaboration competence.

If it is not clear to the students what is expected from them and what is their role in improving educational achievements, then they face ambiguity and their involvement in the process is only formal. As students observed:

Sadly, the principle is, that students are involved in the decision-making, but only to make a tick. It is rather formal. ... . They have a mentality that students need to be everywhere, but they do not listen to them.

To build a trusting relationship and receive sincere feedback, interaction at different levels is necessary. The linkage between students and university can be a programme manager or any other university employee who is able to build trust between students and the university so that the students would provide them with sincere feedback.

Students should have interactions at different levels within the university to learn from these interactions (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). They expect a dialogue to have equal rights to share their ideas and discuss the issues. When information comes from an official source, then it stimulates students to have a better understanding of educational improvements (Men, 2014). Holding meetings with university heads would motivate students, increase their self-confidence and engage them in the university's improvements. Building constant, clear and targeted dialogue with students conveys the message to students that they are valued and viewed as equal partners in the university-student relationship. Dialogue, as emphasised by students, is the way to build trust, engage students in their studies and university activities, and especially, increase their engagement in the quality assurance process.

This clearly shows that students also need to gain competence in the collaboration process. In the opinion of some students, one of the pre-conditions is their willingness to take the initiative but they are aware of the scale of the challenge: there are few active students who are ready to initiate any kind of discussion about changes in the university.

Whatever is organised, there are so few students present. In general, students are so passive nowadays ... You can't take them seriously ...

The concept of accepting students as partners requires up-to-date thinking from the university staff, leadership and students (Carey, 2013). The dialogue

between these parties should be clear, open and constant. The concept places the responsibility on the academic and non-academic staff to be able to collaborate with the students to accept and value their ideas, contribution and participation.

### ***Partnership for improvement***

For partnership for improvement, the parties need to be committed to continuous development (Carey, 2013) and to ensure the trustworthiness of the quality assurance procedures. The university must make its demands explicit to the students and at the same time, make the students feel that their participation is meaningful. Student knowledge or awareness about the improvement processes at the university contributes to the relationship between the students and the university. Students feel satisfied and accomplished once their feedback is heard and considered:

We gave the feedback during the lesson, and teacher changed the amount of the hours, one topic of the subject was left for another year. She listened to us and we were happy that she listened to us. . . . I do know that for my programme they are always looking for how to improve it. What I hear from other students, it was a little different for them, and now it is different.

It also provides the students with a sense of the meaningfulness if their voice is heard; they feel satisfied that the course or other requirements have been changed to fit their needs and expectations. This affects student motivation and makes them more inclined to rely on the feedback system so that every year, they will provide the university with genuine feedback that will help the university to improve.

Even if it is argued by several scholars that the academic life cycle of three years is too short for students to witness any changes taking place, it cannot be an excuse for the university administration to delay the implementation. Witnessing the influence of their feedback has a positive impact on students' motivation to study, to commit themselves and to advocate for the university.

Student engagement becomes a partnership for improvement if the university expresses the value of student input.

Once I was participating there [in the board meeting] and I was so surprised, in a positive way. What they are expecting from us, what kind of input they want from us! It was amazing how the chairman was planning to involve us.

High expectations can encourage students' motivation to engage in partnership with the university.

## Concluding remarks and implications

The analysis of students' perceptions of engagement in the quality assurance process revealed that there is a room for development in every phase of quality assurance. Going forward, the biggest obstacle appeared to be in the planning phase. According to students their involvement in the process of planning and designing the curriculum or courses is rare and unsystematic. Therefore, universities should have mechanisms to systematically engage students (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, the question is how universities ought to resolve the issues of student engagement in quality assurance processes?

This study reveals that more emphasis should be placed on the dialogue between universities and students. The findings demonstrate that there are four consecutive activities that universities should focus on while building up an effective and engaging dialogue. First, attention should be paid to the distribution of information. Timely, trustworthy and two-way communication with students can serve as an impetus to effectively engage students. Students believe that universities should think of various ways to communicate different types of information to them. They do not feel engaged when they receive email, because it is a one-way communication, which limits interaction. In this case monitoring and investigating student engagement while using various ways of sharing information could help universities improve the dialogue with students. Here experiences from the entrepreneurship sector might be helpful but also the views of students should be considered. In addition, the distribution of information should be part of the university's communication strategy, not just something that happens randomly.

Second, attention should be paid to establishing a trustworthy relationship. Student engagement may improve when the university leader's management style facilitates open discussions and supports the feeling of ownership and responsibility of all parties (Kumpas-Lenk *et al.*, 2018). This means that university leadership should focus on the importance of establishing a dialogue between students, academic and administrative staff. In a partnership, dialogue requires that both parties' opinions are taken equally seriously. If students do not feel that their voice is being heard they stop investing in the dialogue. The key to establishing an effective relationship with students requires willingness and efficient skills in communication. This means that universities should ensure that its staff are competent in communication and engaging students. Training sessions for the staff and leaders are necessary to build up those skills. However, along with placing greater responsibility on the university, students should also be trained to improve their collaboration in dialogue skills. On the strategic management level, the idea of keeping and building trustworthy relationships should be part of the universities' mission.

Third, attention should be paid to building a partnership. This implies that university leaders view students as one of the key partners, involve them in strategic planning and management, academic staff invites students for co-creation of the learning process and curriculum. As a result of such a face-to-face interaction, the relationship between the students and the university grows from collaboration into partnership. Well-established co-operation with student unions is valuable in building such partnerships.

Fourth, attention should be paid to using the partnership for improvement. Establishing this foundation is an impetus for students to get involved in the quality assurance process and to take responsibility for its further development. If students are given the experience of co-creating a process with academic staff, then they realise that together there is an opportunity to improve the university and its internal quality assurance system, which in turn would improve their learning conditions. One option is to improve the student's skills of giving meaningful feedback but also enhance various university processes, for example, what happens after the feedback is received, how the university communicates to students how they have used their feedback and how they encourage students to give meaningful feedback. This means that the processes in the university are well planned, transferable and functional to all parties.

The language could be one of the limitations of the study. Part of the study was conducted in English, which was not the students' first language and may have limited the students' ability to fully elaborate on the issues presented during the interviews. Nevertheless, many students contributed to a study during the first interview where they were speaking their native language. In addition, students' views were based on specific questions. The questions that seemed to open up unknown aspects of university management to students may have caused them to limit their answers.

This study aimed to fill a gap in the quality assurance literature by reporting students' perceptions of engagement in the quality assurance process. The outcomes of the study are relevant for the university management, quality specialists, students and staff. The findings create a valuable basis for a further qualitative research project with members of the academic staff to explore their perceptions of collaboration in quality assurance: whether they understand and value its potential, whether they are ready for this kind of cooperation and what is needed for such a partnership to take place. Moreover, the results of effective student involvement need further investigation to determine whether it enhances the quality of studies in universities. It is also important to determine what is quality culture according to students, staff, employers, politicians, and how it is possible to enhance quality culture when universities start to provide more flexible approaches to education, such as nano-degrees, students designing their own curriculum and students as quality managers.



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