

- TITLE:** 2005-2010; 5 years of student participation in Quality Assurance in Spain.
- SUBTITLE:** A review about the beginning of student participation in QA at a national level in Spain, experiences and future challenges.
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- ABSTRACT:** The implementation of student participation in QA has been one of the important challenges that the Spanish university system has faced with regards to the Bologna Process.
- When, in 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted the "Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area" drafted by ENQA, the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) began working to find how students could participate in quality matters, as it did not exist in Spain in those days.
- Two years later, for the first time, Spanish students were taking part in an official institutional assessment programme as observer members of the external evaluation committee, and in 2008 as full members in another programme. Today, students are participating in the verification of recognised degree programmes.
- This paper aims to review the implementation process of student participation in QA in our country, the achieved goals and future challenges.
- KEY WORDS:** Student participation, Quality Assurance, Bologna Process, EHEA, Higher Education, Spain

1. Background

For the Spanish higher education system, one of the most important developments provided by the Bologna Process is the establishment and consolidation of quality assurance systems. The quality assurance, according to standards, procedures and guidelines, at European level constitutes a framework of mutual trust and recognition, both for higher education institutions and for the stakeholders.

Quality assurance policies in higher education have existed in Spain for over 10 years, when in 1996 the Universities Council launched the first National Plan of Quality of Universities. Although it may seem a long time, we must bear in mind that in other European countries there was already a strong tradition of quality assessment; therefore, in Spain, a quality culture is not as rooted and widespread as in these other countries.

In Spain, until recently, the student has not traditionally been viewed as a full member of the university community and, therefore, they did not have the same representation rights as other members of the community. There are some differences across the sector regarding the participation of students in the university system, although in most universities there are bodies or associations of students, representing the students of each university. Student participation was not formally implemented in all universities, nor was there consolidated participation nationwide. This may be one of the reasons that students traditionally have not shown interest in the processes of evaluation and the quality assurance systems.

The student association that represents the majority of students at a national level is CREUP (Coordinator of Representatives of Public Universities, with its acronym in Spanish), and a member of the European Students' Union (ESU). However, at that time, CREUP debates were focused on consolidating student participation nationally and in the new structure of higher education, not necessarily in QA. So it can be concluded that the participation of students in QA was not a real demand from students at that time.

Since 1998, the "World Declaration on Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action", the World Conference on Higher Education of UNESCO recognized students as one of the main stakeholders in higher education, highlighting that therefore, they must be considered key participants and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. UNESCO also considers that their involvement in these issues should be ensured.

The key documents that set out the need for student participation in quality assurance systems within the Bologna Process are those reported in the biennial Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education. Although the statement of Prague in 2001 recognizes that students are full members of the university community and constructive partners as subjects, active and competent in the establishment and construction of the EHEA, with their involvement seen as necessary and welcome, it was not until Berlin, in 2003, when explicit mention was made to student participation in national systems of quality assurance, remembering that by the year 2005 these systems should include, inter alia, participation of students.

Undoubtedly, the main turning point occurs in the Bergen Communiqué in 2005, where a breakthrough can be observed: the European ministers of education endorse the document "Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area" drawn up by ENQA. This document provides a framework for quality assurance systems and it includes the participation of students in these systems. In this same vein, the statement recognizes that most countries have made an effort in the field of quality assurance, but nevertheless progress is still quite slow, particularly with regards to student participation.

Given the above, student participation in Spanish QA can be viewed as an "imposition" from Europe and not as a real demand from Spanish students or quality assurance agencies.

2. The design of student participation in Quality Assurance in Spain. 2005 – 2007.

As noted previously, in Spain, unlike other European countries, quality assurance is relatively recent, although there are great efforts to consolidate the culture of Quality. Similarly, in comparison, there is no student representation so entrenched as that found in other neighbouring countries. This is a first hurdle.

It is as a result of the Conference of Ministers in Bergen, 2005, when Spain began to explore the implementation of student participation in quality assurance. The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), aware of the benefits to be gained from incorporating student views in quality assurance policies, began working on student participation. A forum was organized in 2005, after the Conference of Ministers, as part of the effort to introduce student participation. The Forum, "IV Forum ANECA: Students and quality policies", was a meeting point for different agents of universities where they began to debate student participation in quality assurance policies in higher education. In this forum, Raul Gonzalez remarked that often, students and their representatives are not viewed as mature adults, which hinders their participation.

A few months later, in 2006, ANECA contacted CREUP and other national student organizations, calling for the creation of a working group. The ANECA Working Group for Student Participation in Quality Policies (GATPEPC) was then established, initially formed by staff from ANECA's international and institutional relations unit (3) and representatives of students from several Spanish universities (7). The aim of the working group was to propose possible methods for student participation in the processes of the quality assurance agencies.

To achieve the above objective, the GATPEPC was organized into two subgroups: one conducted a search of the existing European documents on the involvement of students in quality assurance processes and other useful documents, while the other analyzed the situation of student representation in Spain. The major European references were then analyzed, to evaluate the characteristics of existing models, identify best practices and problems, and finally reflect on the landscape of student representation in higher education at the time, and possible future changes.

In October 2006, ANECA hosted an ENQA workshop on the topic of "Student Involvement in the Process of quality assurance agencies". Four examples of student

participation in quality assurance agencies and analysis of a survey conducted by ENQA to member agencies on the participation of students were presented at this meeting.

In June 2007, during the process of the ANECA external evaluation carried out by ENQA, the three students who remained members of GATPEPC were invited as audience by the External Evaluation Committee in order to assess the commitment that ANECA had towards students.

Also, in early July 2007, ANECA held, in conjunction with the Universities General Directorate of the former Ministry of Education and Science, a Summer School at the International University Menéndez Pelayo that focused on "Student participation in quality assessment". This meeting was for representatives of students, quality assurance agencies, vice-rectors for QA and QA technical units, and sought to create a space for reflection for the active participation of university students in quality assurance processes in higher education.

After a year and a half of GATPEPC work, ANECA invited students to participate in one of its programs, the Institutional Assessment Programme (PEI), in the final quarter of 2007. It was the first example and experience, nationwide, of student participation in an ANECA program. This program was chosen because it was near completion and was voluntary for universities. This time the students participated as observers in the External Review Committee, but for practical purposes the work was the same as that of any other member of the committee. For the program, ANECA contacted students who had participated in the Summer School, providing them with a training day on assessment tools.

The value of this experience was very positive for the students, who participated for the first time in such a process, but was also positive for the other members of the Committees and for ANECA itself, being extremely satisfied and noting an improvement of the process by including this new point of view.

3. The involvement of students as full members. 2008 – 2010.

It should be noted that in December 2007, ANECA, aware of the successful participation of students in the PEI, appointed five students as full members of evaluation committees for the verification phase of the program DOCENTIA (evaluation of teaching activity). This was the first time in a formal program in Spain that students participated as full members of committees, a milestone that seemed unattainable a few months earlier, and especially in such a short time.

In February 2008, several students were appointed as full members of the Evaluation Committees of the program VERIFICA, whose task is to analyze and verify the new proposed degrees that Spanish universities want to introduce. This participation is significant, since although it is a process in which other European countries have not included students, the student's point of view takes on added importance since they are familiar with the quality of university training, as long as they are the main users/receivers. Currently, there are fourteen students in undergraduate committees and six students in postgraduate committees.

Moreover, in March 2008, the Advisory Council of ANECA invited Spanish university students to attend its standing committee. However, in 2009, coinciding with the renewal of the Advisory Council, the chairperson of CREUP was appointed as a full member of this Council.

In short, the participation of students in ANECA has grown exponentially over the last two years. Not only in the agency's Advisory Council and the GATPEPC, but student participation also exists in the Quality Label program for doctoral programs in Spanish universities, in the VERIFICA program, in the DOCENTIA program and in the AUDIT program (drafting internal quality systems for universities). That is, there are currently students participating in all programs where such participation is necessary.

The regional quality assurance agencies (of the Autonomous Communities) are making efforts in line with ANECA. Some have more experience in this field; an example of this is the Agency for the quality of the university system of Catalonia (AQU), which includes student participation in recent years, with a positive evaluation by ENQA. However, not all have worked along these lines, but it will become necessary to do so in the near future.

The lack of knowledge on quality assurance among students and representatives of students is one of the difficulties that must be overcome. So, one line of action employed is the organization of different training courses on student participation in quality assurance that have been organized in some Spanish universities framed on the "Meetings on Quality in Higher Education" from ANECA. The aim of these training courses is not only the training of students and their possible recruitment to participate in assessment programs, but also to recognize its importance as a means of disseminating what is known as "quality culture" among the students and their representatives.

4. Review of the experience and vision for the future.

First of all, a certain level of training and knowledge is necessary in order for student participation to realize its full potential and maximum benefits. These include training in tools and processes of quality assessment, knowledge of the QA agency and its programs; knowledge of other universities and the university system; establishment of a relationship with other evaluators, exchange of views and enabling collaboration among them; some recognition for the work; and training as citizens to understand that their reality plays a fundamental role.

In general, and so far, the remaining members of review committees, quality assurance agencies, universities and students have very much appreciated the participation of students in QA programs, which differ by various stakeholders but are generally always positive. Other evaluators, in general, consider that the student plays a key role in the assessment and especially for the aspects relevant to students. In addition, as happens in the rest of Europe, students usually undertake the role of interviewing other (current) students and graduates. The QA agencies have shown an enrichment of the evaluation reports, to expand and include other aspects not previously taken into account, or are not qualified in the same direction. Finally, universities have welcomed this participation, which they see as an opportunity to expand the analysis and therefore improve their quality.

In addition, each area in which students have participated or are participating has specific connotations. On one hand, it regards institutional relations: the participation in the GATPEPC that comprises an area of mutual understanding between the agency and students, and is also a forum for exchange of views on student participation in ANECA. On the other hand, the participation in the various programs: the involvement of students is an enrichment of the process.

In the PEI, a remarkable and distinctive element of the program is the student's role at the site visit of the evaluation committee in the audience with different actors, while participation in the DOCENTIA program included recognition as full stakeholders by universities and therefore their participation was necessary in the process. Most importantly, the VERIFICA program, within the previous verification process, opens the possibility of universities getting an unfavorable report for the implementation of a degree if this does not meet a set of minimum requirements on which the students, as the rest of evaluators, give their opinion. With AUDIT, the aim is to optimize the design of the internal system of quality assurance, in which the participation of students has a wider scope and where participation is particularly relevant since there is a possibility of short-term improvement.

Broadly speaking, student participation is a mutual benefit, a symbiotic relationship that has as a goal and as a consequence an increased capacity to improve higher education institutions and the quality of the university system in general.

All of the above notes the progress that has taken place in Spain regarding the issue of student participation in QA processes; however, there are still aspects that require improvement. It should not be forgotten that there are still participation levels to be achieved and moreover, that it is necessary to consolidate this participation. We must overcome these first drawbacks, making it lines of action and improvement, becoming strengths of the process.

The established procedures for the nomination and appointment of students, as has happened so far, must be consistent and transparent. Except in the PEI program, in the other programs a selection profile is defined; this is an important aspect of the "legitimacy" of students' presence in the process. Establishing a selection profile similar to that used for the selection of academic evaluators is a useful tool. Among the issues to be included in the profile for the effective involvement of students it is necessary for them to have some knowledge of the university system and QA systems, which could be ensured with experience in tasks of representation. Moreover, it is necessary to train students in specific assessment tools to enable them to properly develop their roles as evaluators, with a view to their participation in any level of QA.

It is true that students have a temporary feature in the time they spend at university, but the student body as an entity remains. This aspect, which characterizes students, is far from being negative, becoming a positive aspect of regeneration and renewal. It is important to plan for the human resources required while taking into account the temporary nature of the students, making the continuity and periodicity of these training courses a necessity. Another action line to be maintained, in order to secure the continuity in student participation is the spread of a quality culture. It is also important to encourage students who become involved in quality assurance to contribute to the training of their peers so that the change will

not cause generational gaps and make the training closer and more direct. The relationship between the spread of a quality culture and the involvement of students in these processes is crucial; we must continue raising awareness among students that their participation is important, that they have valuable contributions to make and that their views can help develop and improve the system.

The entire university community must move towards the promotion of a quality culture, especially among students, as a manifestation of good will, responsibility and continuous full participation of students in all quality assurance systems. This must not take place in response to a European tax as has happened on some occasions, but because of its benefits and the need to involve all the stakeholders, ensuring their point of view is listened to, with the overall aim of building a better university system.

To achieve the above goal it is necessary to provide the means for effective participation and to ensure such participation does not jeopardize any aspect of student development (academic, social, etc.), since it means an extra effort of those involved.

5. Overview

As can be seen, the evolution of the process has been quite quick, as noted by the "Bologna Process stocktaking" reports by Bologna Follow-up Group and the "Bologna with student eyes" reports by ESU. This has two aspects: one positive and one negative. On one hand, starting from scratch, genuine student participation in QA has been achieved in record time. On the other hand, this has meant that sometimes the process was running by its own inertia, and some mistakes were made due to lack of planning.

It is important and necessary to monitor student participation in QA. Specific efforts have been made in this field: there have been meetings for reflection of implementation, meta-evaluation process, or feedbacks of the various programs; but there has been no constant and standardized monitoring, as such. This is an important aspect for improving student participation. Proper monitoring of student participation will help to identify possible gaps and establish plans for improvement, correcting any mistakes.

Finally, given the current situation, there is a need to consolidate and institutionalize the participation of students in QA, not only at national level but also at regional one. One of the challenges we face today is the assessment of the possible establishment of a Spanish quality assurance student experts' pool, as already exists in other European countries.

6. Questions for discussion

- How to extend and disseminate the culture of quality among students?
- How to monitor and track student participation in QA?
- Convenience (advantages and drawbacks) of the creation of the Spanish quality assurance student experts' pool? How to do it?

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