

Quality assurance through Student Participation

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Intro

At HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (HU), a variety of organizations and staff members are involved in extracurricular activities. Student Participation (read representation) being one of the most important topics in terms of quality assurance of concerning educational programs, HU feels a strong responsibility towards adequate representation and Student-leadership development. (Bijl, Statusdocument Bestuurlijke Participatie Studenten, 2005)

HU believes that it can improve the quality of education by including students in its quality assurance systems and suited the action to the word by implementing ASP, “Administrative Student Participation”. In 2004 the project ASP started with the purpose of offering support to all students who have the ambition to take on a participatory role within their study program, or at faculty or institutional level. The ASP consist of pro-active students within HU. Depending on the level they are situated at, they control and consult with their program managers, directors or board executives and have an advising role regarding the development and quality assurance of educational programs. At some levels and subjects they have policy-voting rights. The objective of ASP is to ensure that students collaborate and work with administrators and faculty to jointly improve the education, facilities and management of the university. These students, elected by their fellow students, form a community of practice: they share their problems and advices, and consult each other in case of conflicts with managers. To ensure that this group of students form an integral part of our organization, they have been given legal rights: advices cannot be neglected by the management. At the same time these student representatives also have duties, which include: to meet, discuss and advise on relevant topics related to their committees and/or councils.

HU is the only University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands that supports these students with a special department, coordinated by a so-called student participation coach (coordinator).

The coach supports the students with trainings, debate sessions and a yearly reoccurring event called “The Spring Course weekend”. During this Spring Course weekend students follow crash-course trainings on personal development, communication and rules and regulations and more. From experience can be concluded that this intensive weekend program creates an ambitious and driven atmosphere among students. Empowerment is always the main theme.

Student Representation in The Netherlands and at HU

In the Dutch law on “Higher Education and Scientific Research”, it is stated that every institution that delivers higher education must have some type of student representation within its organizational structure.

Student Representation comes in different shapes within different higher educational institutions across The Netherlands. At HU the number and structure of boards and committees with student members is based on the hierarchy similar to that of the management structure. This leads to the existence of committees and boards at each (management) level.

As said, students within ASP, whom are elected, and thus form an integral part of the organization due to their policy-voting rights, have certain duties and responsibilities when it comes to Student Participation. This chapter describes more in details what the activities of student representatives entails.

The primary objective of the broad integration of student participation is to offer students an advisory role at the several hierarchical levels within HU; Program Committees primarily advice their program manager(s) on the curriculum of study programs, amongst other things and primarily by yearly advising on the study guide of their program. Faculty Councils, which involves a representation of students, focus on matters that regard the entire faculty, and general topics that may affect its institutes and its programs. The Faculty Councils work alongside the faculty board and advise on existing or new operational policies.. For some specific topics, their approval is necessary before policy changes can be implemented.

Aside from the Faculty Councils and the Program Committees, there is a Central Advisory Council which is primarily responsible for being the advisory council for the Executive Board of HU. Also within this council, in some matters, their approval is necessary before policy changes can be implemented.

Students within the previously mentioned councils and committees are heavily advised by their executive peers to be well informed on various matters that may be relevant to them. Topics such as latest developments concerning the Executive Board or the faculty Directors, concerning projects that may regard HU or even related news at national level that may have an end-effect on students, their programs or HU. This information, even though not always crucial, is considered as an additional asset, which improves the workflow of a committee and/or council.

How “Administrative Student Participation” is organized

The coordinator is situated within the department of Student Affairs. As explained before, she functionally supports all students that are part of ASP, whether they be in the central council, faculty councils or a program committee. The main role is to support both individual students, as well as the councils or committees as a whole.

Being that Student Participation *can be* a very complicated subject, the primary purpose of the coordinator is to support the liaison between the HU as an organization and its students. (Bijl, Projectplan Bestuurlijke Participatie Studenten , 2005)

Because the amount of areas tends to be widely disperse, the ASP coordinator has appointed a number of Ambassadors that work as a liaison between ASP and the faculties: the “Study Program Committee” (SPC) Ambassadors. These ambassadors are also student representatives that have as a primary task to manage all of the study program committees within their faculties. Being that there are six faculties (three of which have two ambassadors) and one outside-Utrecht location, in the city of Amersfoort, which brings the total to 10 ambassadors. Together with the coordinator they form the “SPC Embassy” (“OC Ambassade” in Dutch). The pre-requisites for becoming an ambassador are; having an extensive network within their faculties, in order to best guide the committees and/or to be well informed on the latest news in regards to Student

Participation, the faculty management and (most importantly) the activities of the central advisory council. The ambassadors are an essential part of ASP because they have tasks of their own: the delivery of information to the committees from ASP, the assurance of continuity and fluid workflow of and between committees, and acting as the contact person between committees and their faculty council. Meanwhile, at the same time, these ambassadors also form as a steppingstone for students within program committees who desire additional information and support that would otherwise only be available from the coordinator of ASP.

ASP events

Students within student participation usually go through a set of trainings, such as the previously mentioned yearly Spring Course, , discussion events and informative gatherings, before being able to fully understand the various complexities of the HU organization.

The biggest event is the yearly Spring Course. During this weekend students take part in at least four trainings and one plenary activity like a debate or a game about a specific topic. Trainers of the Spring Course are former students or experts from relevant work fields.

In cooperation with student organization MUST (“Medezeggenschap Utrechtse STudenten” in Dutch, translated as Student Participation Utrecht Students) there are several trainings throughout the academic year. Themes discussed during these trainings (or discussion evenings) depend on current topics that students have to deal with at that time of year.

If one study program committee wants a private training the coordinator will be the one to provide it, whether the training exists or needs to be created in the spot. Most common subjects in these cases are teambuilding or refresher courses for new members.

In order to be well informed, current members of student participation retrieve their information from external sources such as: the ASP network (Facebook, Twitter and e-mail newsletters), the ASP coordinator, the SPC Embassy and other (local or national) student organizations..

In some cases the coordinator takes on a even more pro-active role towards the group of participating students, to convince them to take action on certain matters like when the results of

the National Student Survey are announced. The coordinator will, for example, stimulate the study program committees to work together on a pro-active advice with suggestions for improvement, regarding to the survey results. In some faculties it already became a standard that study program committees gather four times a year to see if they have similar cases on their agenda.

A coordinator does not explicitly stand on the side of HU or the students . The coordinators' role is objective with a focus on improvement of the study programs.

Future developments

Nowadays HU seeks for possibilities to create less operational tasks for the coordinator by giving more responsibility to the SPC Embassy and student organization MUST. In the future it might be them being the trainers and providers of information, so that the coordinator can focus more on the strategic position of student participation within HU. In this new role the coordinator can become discussion partners for managers that currently still consider their study program committee just as a tool for feedback and not as a sparring partner and part of their quality assurance systems. The role of the coordinator will then change into a *stimulating* partner toward the SPC embassy on the one hand and a *strategic* partner for management at all levels.

Discussion

How do you involve your students in quality assurance? And do you have any idea how we can create a self-learning community with an high level of ownership and prevent that our students become so-called spoiled, due to the high level of support?