European Models of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance: Lessons for the United States

European and American quality assurance systems have many differences, especially in regard to the role of student voices in quality assurance processes. The European Higher Education Area continues to demonstrate, since the Bologna Agreement in 1999, a commitment to including students in meaningful ways, such as by collecting student feedback and allowing opportunities for students to influence conversations regarding quality. In the United States, students may be somewhat involved at the program or institution-level, but are minimally involved in programmatic and institutional accreditation. Despite cultural and legal differences, important concepts from Europe's Bologna Agreement could be beneficially applied to the United States' quality assurance ecosystem. This white paper discusses key elements of European models and recommendations for engaging students in quality assurance in American higher education.

European Models

The Bologna Agreement signaled a turning point for European students' involvement in higher education quality matters. Not only did students become involved in institutions' processes and practices, but they also became leaders for promoting and influencing quality policy at the national and European levels. Support for student engagement from higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and even governments began to grow. Broadly speaking, students are now deeply involved in quality assurance processes at multiple levels.

In a recent European Student Union survey to member countries of the European Higher Education Area, all but one of 39 countries indicated that it had students involved in internal (institution-level) QA processes (Belarus did not). Of those same surveyed countries, 26 countries reported that students were full members of internal assessment bodies. In external QA processes, such as accreditation, 29 countries reported that students participated as full review panel participants. Countries also reported about the role of students involved in QA governance. While four countries do not have a QA agency, 28 student unions are active in QA agencies' governance. The survey also found that 22 governments consulted student unions regarding quality assurance matters in higher education.

Pools of student reviewers are common in Europe as well, where QA agencies, higher education institutions, and other institutions use student experts in their reviews. There are 21 countries that have QA expert pools that incorporate students. Of those countries, all but one reported the experts' pools are widely used (France was the exception). Some of the pools are managed by the QA agencies, such as the United Kingdom's, whereas in Ireland and Romania, the pools are operated independently by national student unions. One of the most robust experts' pools is a regional organization consisting of Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. The European Student Union created QUEST (Quest for Quality Students), which aimed to build a European-level experts' pool. They are active and recruit many students throughout the year.

Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) is an international leader in supporting the quality of higher education through student engagement at multiple levels. They provide training to student leaders across Scotland and receive funding by the government of Scotland, and have about ten staff members. In addition, sparqs collaborates with institutions in developing strategic plans for student engagement, training faculty, supporting reviews, and consulting student governments. At a sector level, sparqs provides support to Quality Assurance Agency Scotland and other organizations to advance the role of students in assuring quality.

Despite many successes, European countries have encountered challenges in engaging students. Two major barriers to effective student engagement include students not being viewed as equal partners, along with a lack of information and training for students. To address these problems, some national student unions are taking proactive steps to promote their own work in quality assurance and demonstrate to students the value of actively participating in feedback mechanisms. Additionally, opportunities for training have increased; for example, in Ireland there is a new pilot called the National Student Engagement Programme that aims to build student engagement capacity by training students and working alongside institutions to examine their own levels of student involvement in quality matters.

Recommendations for Engaging Students in Higher Education QA in the United States
Europe provides an aspirational roadmap for the United States in terms of student engagement in internal and external quality assurance. European models also provide examples of ideas and goals for expanding students' roles in American higher education quality assurance. There are three lines of action that can be accomplished to support this work. The first is to research and understand where students are already actively partnered with institutions and in programs to improve the student experience. The second action is to educate students broadly about quality assurance participation and its benefits. Finally, we need to build a network of students interested and engaged in accreditation and quality assurance.

There are many institutions diligently partnering with students to improve their experience. Mount Saint Mary University in Maryland is one example with a Center for Student Engagement and Success. There is also a high number – around 70% - of student board of trustee members at public universities. Across the country, best practices and exciting innovations in engaging and incorporating students' feedback into institutional decisions exist, yet the breadth and

efficiency remains unknown. Research topics, such as barriers to student leaders engaged in decision-making activities, willingness of faculty and administrators to partner with students, and systems in place to support students in voicing their opinions and ideas must be explored and disseminated.

Educating students in quality assurance prepares them to be engaged, useful, and to add value in institutional and external quality processes. Simply being a student is not sufficient to provide meaningful feedback to programs, institutions, and accreditors. Training should inform students about the history and current landscape of quality assurance. Regardless of whether students are involved in internal or external processes, they must be aware of relevant policies, should learn to analyze current practices and standards, and should have multiple opportunities to provide their feedback. The National Campus Leadership Council provides a conference to retain institutional memory of outgoing and incoming student body presidents, along with a wide array of policy trainings and action-oriented workshops. Institutions, accreditors, and other quality assurance entities or processes should also provide pathways for training students and raising their awareness of effective quality assurance participation.

Building a network of students to garner and sustain interest in quality assurance will spur momentum for learners involved in higher education. Making quality relevant for students – *all students* – begins by interacting with and learning from students. This type of network does not currently exist. Professional and regional accreditors, along with institutions and think tanks, should breed the next generation of student quality assurance experts through fellowships and leadership opportunities. This partnership building has demonstrated added benefits to students. Studies show that engaging students as partners can increase student confidence and self-efficacy, along with understanding others' perspectives better.

Moving Towards Partnership
Ultimately, the United States must start to shift its view of students beyond the role of simply recipients of services and knowledge to that of leadership in designing and assuring the quality of their educational experiences. Here are several initial recommendations:

1) Within the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, there should be a requirement to incorporate student board members on decision making bodies, similar to the existing requirement to have public members serving on federally recognized accreditation boards.
2) National student organizations and institution-wide student governments should also advocate for and participate in quality assurance.
3) We need to build interest in and capacity at the institution and program-levels for students to be involved in not only accreditation reviews, but also internal program reviews and other assessment processes that will build a culture of partnership.
4) Researchers should attempt to capture the variation, along with best practices, of students' involvement in internal QA processes at U.S. institutions.
5) Other practices might involve students serving on hiring committees; supporting student participation in curricular design, review and revision; and involving students as partners in the institutional research process.

Conclusion

The Quality Assurance Commons takes student involvement seriously. From the beginning, we have had students serve on our Advisory Board – one undergraduate representative and another graduate representative. The creation of The QA Commons' Student Quality Assurance Advisory Delegation (SQAAD), the first of its kind in the United States, is a step towards a national network for learners in quality assurance. SQAAD members are advising and critiquing key elements of the design of a new prototype for quality assurance, one that intentionally addresses student engagement. The Quality Assurance Commons will co-design and pilot the process in the 2017-18 academic year; as the pilot process evolves, we will engage SQAAD and use best practices taken from Europe to see where students may maximize their input.

Students in Europe are stakeholders in quality assurance, supported and encouraged to become leaders and influencers in the direction of higher education. While building this system and culture will not be easy, the United States has to begin somewhere. The QA Commons is uniquely situated to promote the student role in quality assurance processes generally and within our own processes. Similarly, the national conversation on engaging students will require multiple modifications in policy and advocacy objectives to meaningfully add value to the current quality assurance landscape.

ABOUT THE QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMONS

The QA Commons is funded by Lumina Foundation to explore, develop, and test alternative approaches of quality assurance that respond to the changing landscape of higher and postsecondary education and will serve the needs of learners, employers, and the larger society. Find out more about us at: http://www.theqacommons.org