



Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development

Volume 10, Number 1

May 2014

The Participation of Students in TEQSA Reviews

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Abstract

The student voice is increasingly used as a measure to assess learning and teaching quality. The renewal of quality assurance in Australian tertiary education has increased the prominence of student voice. While the government has introduced various policy instruments to measure and report student experience results publicly, limited attempts have been made by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to engage students in the assessment and enhancement of quality assurance. TEQSA plans to use national and institutional survey results and student submissions to identify risks, without engaging the diverse groups of students about their experience of learning, as well as other academic and non-academic support services. Ten years of Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audits suggest that the engagement of the diverse groups of student in audits have been useful in identifying areas of good practice and areas needing improvement. The approach used by TEQSA limits not only the engagement but as well the assessment of student voice in improving the quality of their experience. It is far from the innovative developments in other countries such as United Kingdom and Europe where students and student unions are partners with external agencies.

This paper argues the need for the national regulator to engage students in the review process rather than assessing quality solely based on paper trail and documentation review. Failure to engage students in the assessment of quality raises questions on the role of students in external reviews, and whether the national regulator is established to serve the purpose of the government only in advancing quality and or transforming student learning and enhancing their experience.

Keywords

Student participation in quality reviews, student engagement

Introduction

Governments in many countries are renewing their approach towards assessing the quality of teaching and research in higher education institutions. In countries such as Australia, UK, and countries in Europe and the Middle East, progress has been made with a shift of focus from a fitness for purpose approach of assessing quality to one with increased emphasis on meeting threshold standards. External quality audits commenced in Australian higher education in 2001 with the then Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) completing the cycle one audits of all universities and cycle two audits of almost 29 universities. Ten years of AUQA audit used fitness for purpose approach with increased emphasis on enhancements. The AUQA audit engaged various stakeholders in the audit process including senior staff, council members, and members of various committees, a sample of academic and professional staff, employers of graduates, alumni, university partners and offshore campus staff.

As the Australian higher education quality assurance framework shifts its focus from an improvement-led quality assurance to a compliance regime, there is a need to involve policy makers, TEQSA, student unions, and other stakeholders in ways to maximise the engagement of students in the review process. In recent months the debate in media on TEQSA and its role has been more focused on over-regulation and excessive reporting, with limited discussion on mechanisms to genuinely engage students in the review process. TEQSA's approach to assess quality in University and non-University providers overlooks the engagement of students in the process.

The paper is based on the rationale that students are the key stakeholders of the university and their engagement in the external review process is fundamental in improving all facets of higher education experience irrespective of the characteristic of students and mode and location of study. The lack of student engagement in external review undermines government policy to increase student enrolments in universities in a demand driven higher education environment. An external quality review process, which limits student participation, posits students as end users of higher education rather than active participants in evaluation and ongoing improvement.

Student Engagement with AUQA audits

External quality audit by AUQA engaged students in its improvement-led audit process. A typical audit visit to a University included panel members interviewing a sample of 30-40 students. The sample included a cross section of students including: male, female,

undergraduate, postgraduate coursework, higher degree research, and onshore international. In cases where a university has various campuses or partnership arrangements, the panel visited different campuses/partners including offshore and interviewed a sample of students. Besides the scheduled interviews with students, open sessions were organised and communicated with the opportunity for students to meet the panel and voice concerns related to quality. The AUQA audit enabled students to forward any written submissions to the panel for review. Apart from student sessions, the panel scheduled interviews to meet several members of the undergraduate and postgraduate student unions.

The significance of student participation in reviews was reaffirmed in the external review of AUQA in 2006. The panel interviews with participants confirmed the need to increase the participation of students in the review process of institutions. The audit panel recommended *“that AUQA look at ways in which student participation can be increased in the review process of higher education institutions”* (AUQA, 2006, p. 23). The involvement of students in quality audits is increasingly important due to the increased diversity of students with different expectations and experiences. The experience of the diverse groups of students cannot be understood solely by reviewing student satisfaction or student complaints data. The huge reliance on student survey results to assess student experience may not provide an overall picture of the total student experience. A low score on a five point Likert scale may highlight an area of student dissatisfaction; however it may not inform what students are dissatisfied about. Focus group interviews with different cohorts of students enable the interviewer(s) to identify key issues and concerns raised by different groups. Students should be seen as partners in the academic community due to their balanced view about the aim of the academic institution on cultural, political and historical aspects (European Association for Quality Assurance-ENQA, 2006, p. 9). Studies by ENQA in 2006 suggest that students are generally regarded as experts in learning and they are in a better position to assess if the learning outcomes have been achieved and how the teaching has assisted them in the process (ENQA, 2006, p. 14).

Student engagement in a decade of external quality audits by AUQA has increased the voice of students. Some of the improvements may have occurred as a result of internal reviews; however the external audit process has been a driver for rapid change with the urgency of addressing areas needing improvement. Some notable areas of improvement include the following:

- engagement of students, student representative associations, and student unions in self-reviews and trial audits in preparation for the AUQA audit;
- engagement of students in self-initiated internal and external reviews using AUQA audit methodology e.g. review of offshore programs/partnerships;
- engagement of quality units/departments with various student groups such as undergraduate and postgraduate student associations;
- increased promotion on the purpose of quality audits and the role of students in the process with promotional materials prepared explicitly for students;
- enhancement in the measurement of student experience with different cohorts of students e.g. offshore students and benchmarking the results with other cohorts;

- strengthened role of various academic committees in prompting and reviewing reports on student experience with different cohorts of students e.g. onshore and offshore international;
- systematic approach in the management of student complaints with fears that such complaints may be raised by students in panel interviews and open sessions;
- increased emphasis on sharing student survey results with partner institutions as a direct result of AUQA recommendations;
- increased dialogue within the University on the need to close the loop on student feedback;
- increased representation of students in various governing committees; and
- the engagement of student unions and student representative associations in communicating and promoting improvements as a direct result of student voice.

TEQSA Reviews and Student Engagement

The assessment of quality by TEQSA is based on compliance with a number of standards, and external reference points. The compliance check against the standards and external reference points together with performance evaluation using various metrics will enable TEQSA to identify the level of risk using risk indicators to determine the need for scheduled and non-scheduled reviews. The assessment of quality and standards by TEQSA will be based on review of paperwork and documentation forwarded by institutions on compliance with standards and analysis of performance data on various measures. A review of various discussion papers initiated by the Commonwealth government, and limited information on TEQSA's website about audit methodology suggests that the student voice will be predominantly assessed by using student survey results using the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS), University Experience Survey (UES), end of semester teacher and unit evaluations; and student complaints directed to TEQSA. It is expected that the assessment of AGS and UES results by TEQSA will be based on overall university findings rather than sub-sort analysis by course, campus, international onshore/offshore, pathway students, Indigenous students, and other cohorts of students. In 2012 TEQSA outlined its approach related to quality assessment which suggests that the mechanisms to engage students will be via written submissions (TEQSA, 2012)². TEQSA's approach in engaging students in the assessment of quality via written submissions falls behind the practices in overseas countries where students are partners of the external agency with innovative mechanisms used to engage students at all stages of the audit process.

The surface review of student experience will risk the enhancement of student experience as different cohorts of students have different expectations and experience. For example most recent study by Grebennikov and Shah (2012) with first year students suggests that different cohorts of students require varying levels of assistance in learning. Non English Speaking Background (NESB) and international students gave higher importance ratings than other groups with regard to receiving assistance with English language skills. Indigenous students gave higher importance ratings on quick and convenient enrolment, the speed and accuracy with which queries are answered, quality of information about the university and helpful advice on the right combination and sequence of study units, higher than other groups (p.277). More than a decade of first year student experience survey also suggests varying levels of satisfaction of teaching with different cohorts of students

including onshore international, low socio-economic status students (LSES), Indigenous students, and mature age students (James, Krause and Jennings, 2010).

The assessment of student experience solely based on student feedback results ignores the experience of many other groups of students which are not captured in AGS, UES and end of semester surveys. The groups include: higher degree research students; offshore student experience of various support e.g. library; and the total student experience of LSES; pathway students; part time students; and students studying via flexible mode (distance and online). The huge reliance on quantitative student measures also undermines the wealth of qualitative comments collected in surveys written by students on the assumption that the information will be used to improve their experience.

The Prominence of Student Voice

The review of Australian higher education in 2008 discussed student engagement and student experience in detail with a full chapter outlining the issues and challenges higher education institutions could improve student experience. The review found limited improvement in student satisfaction using CEQ data. The review benchmarked CEQ with the National Student Survey (NSS) used in the UK and found different levels of satisfaction (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The report on the review suggested that some of the contributing factors negatively affecting the quality of student experience include student to teacher ratio, the influence of information and communication technology in learning, teaching and administration and the removal of compulsory non-academic fees (p. 72). The review further argued that *“a good student experience is important because students are more likely to complete their studies if they are satisfied and they are more likely to return to study if they have had a positive experience previously – an outcome which is necessary if Australia is to meet its productivity goals”* (p. 69). The declining student experience has also gained the attention of politicians. The then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Ms Gillard argued *“that while graduate surveys tell us that the majority of students are broadly satisfied with their experience, more specific measures of quality reveal a higher level of dissatisfaction with teaching quality, workloads, the learning community, course goals and standards, assessment and learning resources”* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations- DEEWR, 2009).

The government’s response to higher education review states that Australian higher education should *“provide students with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience”* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 7). Between 2009-2012, the Australian government has introduced a number of policies related to the measurement of student experience with the aim to improve the learning experience of students in universities. Some of the policies include: (1) the implementation of University Experience Survey (UES) which measures the onshore undergraduate student’s experience in their first and final year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012); review of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which includes the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011); and possible introduction of graduate outcomes survey in 2013 (Trounson, 2012) which may replace AGS with the aim to measure the extent to which graduates have attained generic skills.

The lack of student engagement in TEQSA reviews undermines the review of higher education in 2008 which outlines current challenges facing the higher education sector with regard to improving the quality of the student experience. It also undermines various initiatives introduced by the government between 2010-2012 to enhance the measurement of student experience. The lack of student engagement in TEQSA reviews contradicts government policy to increase the access and participation of underrepresented students in higher education. The current quality assessment by TEQSA fails to meet government policy which stresses the importance of improving transition, retention and student experience. A quick glance at TEQSA's strategic plan for 2011 to 2014 suggest that *"the regulation and quality assurance in the sector will help protect the interests of students, no matter where, what or how they study"* (TEQSA, 2011). TEQSA's regulatory and risk framework outlines that the agency will use three overarching 'priority risk consequence areas' in guiding an overall judgement about levels of risk. They include risk to students; risk of provider collapse; and risk to the sector's reputation. TEQSA defines risk to students as *"overall risk relative to the provider's ability to deliver quality educational outcomes for all its students (including international students)"* (TEQSA, 2012, p. 9)¹.

Student interest irrespective of the mode of study and location can be protected if students have more opportunities to play a greater role in audits and reviews. The use of student survey data in assessing the quality of learning experience does not inform various aspects of University experience that requires improvement. The huge reliance on survey data ignores certain cohorts of students who maybe disengaged with surveys due to their level of satisfaction, survey fatigue and low level of engagement due to lack of follow up on survey results by institutions. Furthermore, the quantitative data depending on what is assessed and how the data is reported does not provide an in-depth picture on student experience within and beyond the classroom on many aspects, such as online learning, information technology support, remote access to learning resources, libraries, administrative support, general student facilities, services and events provided by student unions, strength of student representative associations, campus accommodation, career and alumni networks, and other campus life services which engage students in productive learning.

Conclusion

A decade of improvement-led audits in Australia together with international practices suggests that student engagement in external reviews is not only necessary- but morally right. The current practice which uses surveys to measure student experience do not necessarily identify areas needing improvement in all aspects of university experience. Evidence suggests significant gaps in current practices used to measure student experience with different cohorts of students, such as offshore. It is also clear that the current instruments used to measure student experience are more focussed on assessing course and teaching rather than the total student experience. The assessment of quality using student survey results which are collected internally in universities also questions whether the external agencies such as TEQSA should rely on universities to provide reports on the findings, as low performing areas maybe hidden with fears of further scrutiny by the external agency. TEQSA may compel universities to evidence student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement however such approach does not necessarily enhance the student experience.

The assessment of quality assurance and standards requires external quality agencies to rethink innovative strategies to engage students in external reviews beyond the current practices in Universities. Student engagement in external reviews can only be fostered and promoted through genuine partnerships. The lack of genuine engagement of students will no doubt risk the quality of Australian higher education with increased diversity of students. The changing expectations and experience of different cohorts of students requires innovative strategies to engage students so that the external quality assessment is well informed on areas of good practice and areas needing improvement. The implementation of improvement also requires a joint effort by the agency, Universities and students.

Biographical details

Mahsood Shah is an Associate Professor with English Language and Foundations Studies Centre at the University on Newcastle, Australia. In this role Mahsood is responsible to strengthen the research capacity of the centre on a wide range of areas including access, participation, and academic outcomes of disadvantaged students. Prior to joining the University of Newcastle, Mahsood was the Principal Advisor at RMIT University. Mahsood has also worked in a number of other universities and private for-profit providers in Australia in strategy and quality assurance roles.

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This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education: sleid.cqu.edu.au

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ISSN 1832-2050