



SPEAQ

**Project: Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality/ SPEAQ**

## D.7. Students Focus Groups Questions and Data Summary

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*Report*

## Introduction

SPEAQ project is intended to complement the work of larger-scale studies in quality from a range of perspectives (the student and the institution) and it will both learn from and contribute to the bigger debates on quality that are going on at pan-European level.

The aim of this project is to connect three key quality circles: teacher, student and quality manager in order to share and enhance quality assurance practice in higher education. The specific objectives are to:

1. Create an interactive workshop to facilitate discussion between teachers (and teaching related staff), quality managers and students in order to share practice and to explore new ways in which quality assurance can be carried out within the university context
2. Collect data on stakeholder views of quality assurance and enhancement within their higher education experiences to elaborate and inform the nature of the three quality circles under consideration in this project
3. *Workshop* – The face-to-face quality workshop will act as a forum for teachers, students, quality managers within the partner institutions to meet together and to discuss/learn more about quality assurance, as conceived by this project.

## Acknowledgements

The European Students' Union and the whole team of SPEAQ project express special thanks to all students and student representatives from

University of Innsbruck, Austria;

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark;

University of Jyväskylä, Finland;

University of Szeged, Hungary;

University of Trento, Italy;

University of Aveiro, Portugal;

Babes-Bolyai University, Romania;

University of Deusto, Spain;

Subject Center for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies is part of Southampton University, UK

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## Summary

The aim of SPEAQ project is to connect three key quality circles: teacher, student and quality manager in order to share and enhance in higher education. This project sets out to address a real concern that quality assurance can become ritualised rather than embedded in learning and teaching practice.

The project objective is to seed new ideas on how to improve quality assurance practice within the institution providing evidence of how bringing together stakeholders in the quality process can lead to a wider and more meaningful interpretation of quality assurance.

The current report presents the data collected from 114 students from 9 universities from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and UK. Their ideas, answers and suggestions came out during focus group discussions, facilitated by European Students Union members.

The students, together with teachers and quality managers are the internal drivers for quality assurance at institutional level. A better communication and interaction between the stakeholders is needed in order to achieve improvements in HE quality on institutional level.

There are many good reasons why an institution may need to initiate, implement and review its quality assurance processes.

The answers and suggestions given by the students are valuable contribution towards improving the quality process in the involved universities and sharing identified good practices.

## 1. Methodology

### 1.1. Focus Groups Creation and appointment of facilitators

The European students' Union

- ✓ led the development of the student focus group questions,
- ✓ identified students from the ESU reference group to support partners running focus groups and in most places
- ✓ assured an ESU representative as facilitator of the discussion. Where this was not possible as lack of availability, ESU contacted its local member to provide the necessary support.

### 1.2. Designing a framework for moderating student focus groups

The workshop pack, developed as part of implementing Work Package 2 of SPEAQ project contains the framework for the focus groups discussion and facilitation:

- A short presentation by the facilitator – why the need for this workshop, the general background to this initiative, a summary of the main activities for the workshop
- A discussion activity around the nature and purpose of quality assurance and its relationship to quality enhancement (who is it for, who is responsible and why does it matter?)
- An introduction to the LanQua Toolkit Quality Model followed by feedback from participants (what does it mean to them, how does it fit in with their experience and practice?)
- A pair/group activity which uses a set of short case studies of 'good practice' which participants have to interpret for a number of key audiences (this will encourage reflection on the different ways in which quality is viewed by different stakeholders and how their own quality stories may differ depending on their role in the institution)
- An outline of some potential scenarios for action based on the outcomes from the workshop
- An invitation to develop and evaluate these activities as mini-projects

The appointed facilitators had the freedom to improvise, adapt, and give further explanation if necessary.

In addition, a questionnaire has been developed with three series of questions about quality Assurance:

- ❖ What quality means to you?
- ❖ What is the quality culture at your institution?
- ❖ How the quality can be improved?

The summarized answers and suggestions are presented in Section 3 of this report.

### 1.3. Data collecting by group discussions/workshops

The planned time for the focus groups discussions has been set for two hours. However, it happened to be needed more time so that students raise all issues regarding the quality assurance in their institution. The questions from the questionnaire were the basis for the discussion where students have to think about what makes their experience valuable, what are the elements of a good institution or course, how students in general and each of the present personally is or could be involved in quality assurance?

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Where less than planned 8-10 students appeared for the discussion, the questionnaire has been sent to students via e-mail.

This is how, by 16<sup>th</sup> January 2013, the opinion of 114 students from 9 universities from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and UK.

### 1.4. Data processing

The reports of facilitators and project partners have been forwarded to ESU for analysis, comparison and further dissemination.

Although both facilitators and participants in focus groups did great job and managed to collect interesting practices, ideas for small projects, etc. it has to be mentioned that due to the not convenient timing for the discussions (end of semester and summer vacation), some data was forwarded to ESU with a delay which resulted in a delay of data processing.

### 1.5. Reporting and drafting conclusions

In order to collect, compare and further disseminate good practices and opportunities for improving the quality assurance in higher education from students and students representatives point of view, ESU has the task to prepare the summarized report with findings and suggestions as outcomes from the students focus groups discussions and e-mail interviews.

### 1.6. Closing remarks

The chosen methodology for data collecting proved to be efficient and focus groups discussions achieved their goal to raise the awareness of the students about what is quality and how they can be personally involved in improving the quality assurance in their institution.

## 2. Overview on focus groups

All focus groups have been shaped in a way to present as many as possible points of view and experiences. In general, the students that have expressed interest to participate in the discussions came from the first and second year of the studies, as well as from Master's classes and even PhDs. They have also represented various faculties, various age groups, with and without experience abroad. The members of students' unions not only have been present, but also took active role in the discussions, based on their better knowledge of internal procedures and communication channels.

In most of the cases, ESU representatives have managed to fulfil their role as discussions facilitators.

Partners in Finland, Spain and UK made extra effort to find the best time for the discussions in the end of the semester and/or ESU representatives availability.

Where less students appear for the discussions (i.e. University of Deusto, Spain), additional information have been gathered via e-mail.

### 3. Results from facilitated group discussions

Before going to the tables with the summarised findings from the discussions, let's give some specific facts about the universities involved and their focus groups characteristics:

- **University of Innsbruck, Austria** has vast experience in European co-operation and is recognized for The Innsbruck Model for L2 Didactics which integrates principles and theories of teaching, learning and assessment underlying the teaching and learning of all languages into one educational model.

As the SPEAQ project was deemed to be of importance in connection with developments towards the School of Education, contacts to students were set up through the Quality Officers for teaching degrees. Thus, the focus group consisted of representatives rather than a random group through personal contacts.

**The participants in the Student Focus Group at University of Innsbruck were 7 student representatives, all on teaching degrees, variety of subjects. The discussion took place on 27th June 2012.**

- **Copenhagen Business School, Denmark** has been identified as neither a traditional business school nor a broad university, as it combines elements from both worlds - however, always with a business - and a Business in Society - focus and a commitment to research-based education. **Quality assurance at CBS** includes the following regular activities:
  - International accreditations (EQUIS, AMBA, AACSB)
  - International Benchmarks as a recurrent activity
  - Peer review of research departments at least once every 5 years
  - National Programme accreditation by ACE Denmark according to Danish legislation
  - Course and Programme evaluations as a regular activity at the end of each elementHowever, as it will be described later, after the discussion the students found place for improvement in four areas.

At CBS a total of 12 students participated – 6 bachelor and 6 master students respectively with the majority of them (9) active in local student politics, serving as members of the study boards that run programmes in the Danish university system or as members of other bodies (Academic Council, CBS' Board). They were deliberately chosen on the basis of those roles because it was thought that that background would add most to the discussion. CBS does not have faculties so all participants came from the social science/business/management field. ) participants were Danish, 3 were full-degree non-Danish CBS students.

Due to problems with finding relevant students willing or able to participate the focus group was held later than originally scheduled, i.e. in September 2012.

- **University of Jyväskylä, Finland** is a research-intensive multidisciplinary university. Its Language Center quality development in the last 15 years has been based on collegial, departmental action research focused on discipline specific curriculum development, ICT-enhanced language teaching, professional competence building, intercultural communication,

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content and language integration and their assessment. The Center has been awarded twice for its quality development.

For the purposes of the project two focus groups have been formed:

**Group 1: 9 second-year students**

**Group 2: 13 fourth-year students**

**The interviews took place on 13th September 2012.**

- **The University of Szeged, Hungary** is the second largest in the country. The Faculty of Education directly involved in SPEAQ project has a committee dealing with quality issues at institutional level; students and staff have experience in exchange programmes and research and educational projects.

**The focus group discussion was held on 10th May 2012. The participants were 13 students from three university faculties: the Faculty of Science (BSc in Environmental Studies), the Faculty of Economics** (Higher vocational program in Banking and Finance) and the Faculty of Education, representing the humanities and the foreign languages modules in the same programs.

- **University of Trento, Italy** in its 50 years of history has been known for its attention towards international relations and mobility and for the quality of its research and courses. There are 16,000 students and about 600 faculty and researchers. The University of Trento proved to have the best Italian standards according to ministerial evaluation criteria, assigned according to the quality of the research and courses. The University placed itself in **1<sup>st</sup> position** before the Politecnico di Torino and the Politecnico di Milano.

The **8 students** who took part in the **Focus Group discussion held on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011**, were a fairly typical group, broadly representative of the student body in Trento. Six were Bachelor's students and two from Master's courses. Four were from the Faculty of Economics, two from the Faculty of Science and one each from the Faculties of Law and Arts and Humanities. There were no students from the Faculties of Sociology, Cognitive Science (which is in another town) or Engineering. Six of these students are student representatives at some level (discipline area, faculty or university), while only two have no such role.

- **University of Aveiro, Portugal** is one of the most dynamic and innovative universities in Portugal. Attended by about 15,000 students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the UA has achieved a significant position amongst higher education institutions in Portugal, being one of the top universities regarding the quality of its infrastructures, the strength of its research and the excellence of its staff.

The focus group discussion on QA in the University of Aveiro took place on **23<sup>rd</sup> May 2012**. The group was made up of **9 students** (3 2nd cycle - Masters Students and 6 1st cycle - Licenciatura students) from different areas.

- **The Babes-Bolyai University (BBU), Romania** is one of the largest in the country and quality in language training and language competence is of great importance for its policy.

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BBU has organized **two focus groups discussions on the 1st of June 2012 and the 8th of June 2012**. The profile of the students for the two focus groups was different and was intended to give more insight on QA perspectives in the university:

On the **1st of June**, the focus group brought together **9 students** from the same department, i.e. the Applied Modern Languages Department of the Faculty of Letters who were enrolled on 1st year BA, 3rd year BA and 1st and 2nd year MA programmes. The students had not met before and had never had discussions on QA topics prior to this meeting.

On the **8th of June**, the focus group brought together **10 students** with roles in the BBU Student Council. Given that BBU is a multicultural and multilingual university with three distinct lines of study (Romanian, German, Hungarian) it was deemed necessary to invite representatives from all three lines of study, all three Bologna study cycles (bachelor, master, PhD) and from as varied specialisations as possible from the 21 Faculties of the university. The students present were used to meeting in official contexts to discuss QA issues and had had discussions on similar topics before.

- **University of Deusto, Spain** has valuable experience in teaching and research, as well as mobility for students and lecturers. Since 1994, the university works towards improving its quality under Bologna.

**During the focus group discussion planned for 12th June 2012, only 4 students appear** this is why, **the organizers approached a second group of students via e-mail. The first group represented the fourth year philology students and the second one- six MA students enrolled in an Erasmus Mundus MA and coming from different countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Pakistan).**

- **Subject Center for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies is part of Southampton University**, one of the top 15 research universities in UK; Tutorship programmes are in place and prospective students are given the opportunity to "feel" the university atmosphere before admission.

**The UK partner organised two focus groups with two different sets of students.** The first group was made of **six Modern Languages students** doing an internship on the REALIE (Residence and employment abroad leading to international employability Project) project. They were enthusiastic about the project but sometimes struggled to reflect on quality as a general process within their institution and focused instead on particular aspects of their course they didn't like. The second focus group was organised in partnership with the University of Southampton Student Union and included **eight faculties' student union representatives**. This group had a good knowledge of the university's quality mechanisms related to students and was able to formulate their answers in a more balanced and objective way.

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### 3.1. What Quality means to students?

An overview of the common and specific issues about what quality means to students is presented in Table 1, below:

Question	What makes your institution/ programme/course a good one?	What makes your experience as a student a valuable one?	What is the most rewarding learning experience?	What does the term quality mean within your university?	How can you influence the coherence and development in the programme?
University					
<b>Common Answers</b>					
All	The teaching staff;  The learning process;  The course is connected to the future job	Learning something new;  Working in groups;  Having an opportunity to apply knowledge in practice;  Networking; Exchange	Learning experiences in the main subject;  Practical experience;  International Experience (conference, Erasmus mobility)	Quality of teaching; better time-table; well-equipped classrooms and libraries; sport facilities and cultural programmes; career counselling and employability of students; offering post-graduate courses; good communication between students, teachers and administrative staff	With better time management;  With better focus on the main subject;  By providing feedback;
<b>Specific Answers</b>					
University of Deusto, Spain		Being able to conceive education with European and global perspective			
University of Szeged, Hungary			According to some students, participation in Erasmus should be less expensive	The quality is teacher-dependent mainly;	
University of Southampton UK				To make one "feel" the university; The atmosphere on the campus; The community spirit	
University of Aveiro, Portugal		<b>Nobody considered internationalization!</b>			
University of Trento, Italy	Overall student friendly institutional organization; Diversity				

Table 1.

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### 3.2. Quality culture in the university

An overview of the common and specific issues about the quality culture at university level is presented in Table 2, below:

Question	Do you have a voice within your university?	In what context is quality discussed in your programme?	Is quality a daily matter for you?	How do you feel you are supported in your learning development?	Who are the quality managers at your institution?
University					
<b>Common Answers</b>					
All	Yes we have. Most of the time we are heard. However, the plan for implementation of the suggestions we give is not made public	Usually is limited to the end of the semester evaluation/ feedback.	Quality is a must and is a daily matter. However, sometimes the results are not so good. Often improvement comes by trial and error.	Tutorship programme in place; Class representatives Students unions;	Do not know!
<b>Specific Answers</b>					
University of Innsbruck, Austria					Students now know who the QM is as he was present at the discussion
University of Szeged, Hungary				Class representatives and students unions are not very efficient	
University of Southampton UK		In addition to the semester feedback, we talk to teachers and to personal tutors.			
Babes-Bolyai University, Romania		University should consider quality even during the stage of the admission of the prospective students		Tutorship programmes only seen abroad in other universities, but not implemented in this university	
University of Aveiro, Portugal			No, since there is no quality culture in practice		

Table 2.

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### 3.3. Improving the quality

An overview of the common and specific suggestions how the quality of learning and development process could be improved is presented in Table 3, below:

Question	How can the learning experience be enhanced?	What can you contribute to enhancing the learning experience?	What is in place for future developments in quality?	What would you like to improve in the study experience and how would you do it?	What do you think a quality manager does/should do to improve quality?
University					
<b>Common Answers</b>					
All	Increasing the courses on the main subject and reduce those on the other general subjects; More coherence between courses; More input on beginning of career; Less listening, more doing and discussions; Work in smaller groups; Find better ratio of lectures and seminars; PPPs with companies; Work placements; Experience abroad	Better time management;  Focus on my main subject;  Communicate with other students;	Do not know!  No follow up information from students' feedback!	More interaction;  Mix of various methods;  Better relationship with businesses.	Become visible first.  Do not know what the QM is doing.  Should listen to all stakeholders and discuss best practices in order to decide for improvements.
<b>Specific Answers</b>					
University of Innsbruck, Austria		Will be more responsible when voting for class/students' representatives	Checking learning objectives during the term, asking for interim feedback		
Jyvaskyla University, Finland			Courses and programmes development and improvement based on students' feedback		
University of Trento, Italy				Introduce compulsory internships for Masters courses	
Babes-Bolyai University, Romania		Launch a student tutoring project at the level of the department		Analyse the reasons of university drop-out; Launch initiatives to promote the university in the high schools	
CBS, DK			To pilot dedicated 'quality boards' across several	Have smaller groups and more time for individual and team work=	Improvement of the various administrative units' ability to deal

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			<p>programmes to avoid over-bureaucratization as a model for more detailed discussions about <b>alignment of programmes' learning objectives and expectations from the job market;</b> Student evaluations- CBS needs to revise the set-up behind these questionnaire-based evaluations and the way they are discussed and used for assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning quality.</p>	<p><b>improve the class sizes and balance between one-way lecture and more interactive seminar teaching.</b></p>	<p>with students' needs</p>
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**Table 3.**

### 3.4. Ethical Issues

Although no ethical issues were discussed in the focus group, some of the identified problems and ideas about quality, linked to admission, participation in exchange programmes, commercialization of higher education and role of students representatives, may raise the following questions:

- Is higher education a "right"? Should it be something to pay for? If so, how much more expensive would be the better quality higher education? Who shall pay for it?
- If quality higher education is a "right" and students representatives/ unions are not strong enough everywhere, how they can negotiate this social arrangement?

### 3.5. Good Practices

The **Language Center of University of Jyväskylä, Finland** has two awards for its quality development. Its students are involved in assuring the quality in the university through the student representatives, departmental student associations and councils and other active students from the faculty. When given opportunity to provide feedback, their voice is heard. Students' interests are part of quality in university. There are enough forums and ways to give feedback and improve quality of the courses.

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The most rewarding experience for the students of **University of Innsbruck** is when they practice what they have studied on theory. The courses are strongly connected to students' future profession as teachers. They believe this assures their better employability upon graduation.

### Conclusions and recommendations

In all focus groups, communication is identified as an important element of a good institution. However, according to the participants in the discussions, communication is the most common problem. Students require better communication teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, student-to-student, student-to teacher, student-to administration through regular meetings, round table discussions etc.

In addition to communication, students are looking for opportunity to implement in practice the theoretical knowledge they have obtained. Thus universities should consider including mandatory internships into their curricula.

The outcome from the second set of topics discussed shows two concerning findings:

- 1) Students do not know who the quality managers in their institutions are. Thus, quality managers should become more visible, as well as the results from their work;
- 2) Class representatives and students unions are not efficient everywhere at the same level.

The answers to the third set of questions shows that students have ideas how the learning process could be enhanced, but are not so creative when it comes to their personal involvement. (Nice exception are the participants from Romania, who report few ideas for small projects within short and medium term)

This is partly due to the fact that they are not aware what is in place regarding quality assurance in their university, which is due to bad communication and not knowing the role of the quality manager.

Partners from Austria, Finland apparently have good experience in communication, employability, students' representatives' involvement and international cooperation. Their good practices need to be shared with other universities in Europe, starting with QUEST project partners.

Solving the mentioned above problems will increase the quality culture significantly and improve the quality of teaching and studying and make students "feel" their institution.