

# PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS ON FACTORS THAT CONSTRAIN THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROMOTION IN TWO COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

The need for student involvement in quality assurance and promotion in higher education has been a topical issue for a couple of decades. This is because students are valuable stakeholders who are at the receiving end of the higher education delivery chain and their contribution to quality assurance processes and promotion cannot be underscored. Various researchers have alluded to the fact that when students participate in quality assurance and promotion processes as joint partners, their desire to see the processes succeed would be re-invigorated. While it is easy to understand and appreciate the value of involving students in quality assurance and promotion processes, the literature reviewed has shown that, in practice, not much is happening in this regard. The article explored the perceptions of students from two comprehensive universities in South Africa on the factors that constrain their involvement in quality assurance and promotion processes in their respective higher education institutions and their possible solutions. Convenience sampling was used to select student respondents at the two selected comprehensive universities. Semi-structured questionnaires were sent to student participants to complete and the responses were coded and analysed using the Thematic Analysis Approach. The results of the study showed that the lack of knowledge on quality and quality assurance issues, lack of engagement platforms and lack of involvement in institutional decision-making processes were some of the challenges constraining the participation of students in processes pertaining to quality assurance. Some of the solutions to mitigate against the challenges proffered by students included having tutorials on quality and quality assurance issues, recognition of students as co-partners in the implementation of all academic processes and creating platforms to enable students, academic staff and management to engage one another on quality and quality assurance related issues.

**Keywords:** perceptions, student involvement, quality promotion, challenges, comprehensive universities

## INTRODUCTION

The need to involve students in quality assurance and promotion in higher education has gained traction in the higher education discourse over the last couple of decades. The debate has mainly centred on the need to actively engage students in all processes pertaining to their educational needs. The fundamental reason behind the inclusion of students' debate is that students are key beneficiaries of the higher education delivery chain and their contribution to areas such as curriculum planning, teaching and learning, quality assurance processes, research, community engagement, governance and decision making processes cannot be underscored. Various researchers have alluded to the fact that there is a strong connection between student engagement and student success (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten 2014; Palomares 2014; Wawrzynski, Heck and Remley 2012). The belief is that when students are actively involved in the education processes, they are in a better position to contribute to their learning, determine the quality of their education, gain knowledge on quality and quality assurance processes and procedures and make meaningful decisions about their future plans. In this way students feel that they play a significant role in shaping their future goals and this is likely to impact positively on their academic endeavours, thereby leading to their success.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2009) asserts that student participation gives students the ability to assess the quality of their programmes, thereby creating a sense of owning those programmes. Ryan (2015) asserts that one of the benefits of involving students in quality assurance initiatives is transparency, which means that all participants would be able to see the outcomes of the processes and the subsequent changes thereof.

Researchers have given diverse definitions of student engagement. Trowler (2010, 3) asserts that student engagement involves the willingness of students and their institutions, to invest time, effort and other resources to maximise student experience and boost learning outcomes, development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution. The Boston Student Advisory Council (cited by Joselowsky and Aseltine n.d.) on the other hand, postulates that student engagement is when young people are seen as valued partners and active participants in both their education and decisions that affect the academic and socio-cultural climate of their learning environment.

Common in both definitions is that student engagement is about the academic welfare of students. The whole educational process should be centred around students who are valuable players in the higher education puzzle. Being the important role players, students should be actively involved in the decision-making processes that affect their learning environment to ensure that the quality of the education they receive is not compromised. Maintaining quality can only be achieved with active student participation (Palomares 2014).

While it is easy to understand and appreciate the value of involving students in quality assurance and promotion processes, the literature reviewed has shown that, in practice, not much is happening in this regard (HEQC 2009). Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten (2011) concur and postulate that although students are key role players in the higher education sector, they are hardly consulted about their educational experiences or opinions and are often side-lined in the designing of teaching approaches. In those institutions where student engagement is practised, the engagement is often found to be superficial or tokenistic (Council on Higher Education 2020). Similarly, the HEQC (2009) baseline study on students' participation in quality assurance highlighted the numerous challenges that constrain student involvement in quality assurance processes. Among the challenges highlighted were students' lack of understanding of what quality assurance entails, lack of knowledge on institutional policies pertaining to quality assurance and not knowing what roles to play in these quality assurance processes.

This article explored the perceptions of students from two comprehensive universities in South Africa on the factors that constrain their involvement in quality assurance and promotion processes and their possible solutions. Getting students to highlight the challenges constraining their involvement in quality assurance, and at the same time coming up with solutions to mitigate those challenges, was considered an ideal approach to student engagement.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The study was anchored in the “students as co-constructors” approach. This approach recognises students as key role players in the quality assurance and promotion of educational programmes (Bovill et al. 2011). The National Union of Students of the United Kingdom (NUS 2012, 8) holds the view that partnership is about empowering students to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education as a whole. Putting it simply, student engagement should be all encompassing, implying that areas such as curriculum planning, teaching and learning, research, community engagement, quality assurance and promotion as well as student governance and decision making are areas that students should be actively involved in. Palomares (2014) adds weight to the discussion and avers that students should be included at all levels in quality assurance and decision making in order to improve the quality of higher education. Student views need to be incorporated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback to make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes (Harvey 2001, 2). Through their active participation, students are in a better position to contribute meaningfully to all the academic processes pertaining to their learning and development. Students know what is best for them, that is, the knowledge that they want to receive from their educators and how that knowledge should be effectively

communicated to them. Moreover, by engaging students in all the educational processes, there is a likelihood that they will feel a sense of belonging, ownership (Taylor and Wilding 2009) and motivation and their desire to succeed is likely to be re-invigorated. Furthermore, when students are actively involved in all the education processes, they are likely to feel some sense of security knowing that their interests are safeguarded and protected. Creating a conducive environment for students to contribute to their learning is likely to have a positive effect on students' academic performance.

Bovill et al. (2011) make mention of three different approaches in the planning process in which students can participate in, namely, students as co-creators of teaching, course design and curricula. Key in these three approaches is the collaboration of students and academic staff in the academic processes and that students are engaged as partners and not as passive recipients of the learning material. Student participation enables students and academic staff to discuss and share ideas, raise their concerns and possibly come up with solutions to the problems identified. Participation of students in such processes assures them that their involvement is being valued and not tokenistic. It also enables students to understand the processes involved in teaching and learning, course design and curriculum planning, quality and quality assurance and to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes. Student involvement in the processes is likely to have an effect on how they view education as a whole.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

A case study design was employed in this exploratory and qualitative study. Aspers and Corte (2019, 155) view qualitative research as a process that enables better understanding of the phenomenon studied. Similarly, Santha et al. (2015) assert that this type of research focuses on the opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals. The study opted for the qualitative research approach because it allowed the researchers to gain a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon through interrogating the views of the participants who were involved in the study.

### **Population and sampling**

The study population consisted of 42 students from two selected comprehensive universities in South Africa. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Dörnyei 2007 (cited by Etikan, Musa and Akassim 2016) defines convenience sampling as a non-probability or non-random sampling technique where members of the study are selected based on whether they

meet a certain criteria such as issues of availability at a given time and willingness to be part of the study or accessibility. The convenience sampling was considered appropriate for this study in that semi-structured questionnaires were sent to participants who were available at the time the study was conducted and were also willing to take part in the study. The study participants comprised some Student Representative Council (SRC) members and the general student population. The sample consisted of 14 male and 28 female students. All 42 participants were in the 18 to 35 years age category.

### **Data collection**

Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires with open-ended questions. A semi-structured questionnaire is a qualitative data collection tool which the researcher uses to ask participants a set of predetermined but open-ended questions. Semi-structured questionnaires can either be administered face to face or can be emailed to participants. The latter was adopted by the study due to time and financial constraints. The questionnaire had two sections. The first section entailed biographical details of the participants while the second section consisted of open-ended questions based on students' perceptions on factors that constrain their involvement in quality assurance and promotion. Participants were given the questionnaires individually and requested to return the completed questionnaires within a stipulated period.

### **Data analysis**

Qualitative data collected from the respondents was coded and analysed using the Thematic Analysis approach which is suitable for analysis of narratives. Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) state that content analysis deals with processes that are meant to ensure thorough analysis, examination and verification of written data. Similarly, the thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis which is used to classify and present themes/patterns that relate to the data (Ibrahim 2012). The narratives were read several times in order to identify the emerging themes. The collected data was organized in a logical manner based on emerging themes. Finally, the themes explaining the data were determined. Neuman (2009) points out that themes or concepts make the researchers generalise the findings in qualitative research studies because they are generally fixed concepts or simple variables in such studies. As a result, this qualitative research analysed the data by categorising it according to the themes that were identified.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The section presents the findings of the study conducted to elicit the perceptions of students on factors that constrain their involvement in quality assurance and promotion. The challenges identified by the respondents included a lack of understanding of what quality assurance and promotion was about, lack of information on the quality assurance and promotion processes, lack of awareness of the existence of institutional quality assurance and promotion policies and students not knowing what role to play in quality assurance and promotion processes. The responses were arranged according to the themes generated from the responses of the participants.

### **Lack of understanding of quality assurance and promotion**

When students were asked if they understood quality assurance, most of them expressed their lack of knowledge on what quality assurance and promotion was all about. When they were further probed to define what they thought quality assurance was, many showed that they had no idea of what quality assurance was. Below are some extracts which attest to this:

“I have no idea.” (4)

“Quality assurance are those people who choose which research should be accepted or journal should be chosen.” (1)

“Quality assurance is a major policy or commodity in terms of daily running of the institution.” (5)

“Quality Assurance try to provide bursaries so that learners can’t suffer in their studies.” (8)

### **Lack of information on quality assurance and promotion processes**

Findings revealed that students lack information on quality assurance and promotion. Students stressed that they needed more knowledge and information on quality assurance policies and practices so that they could be better empowered to participate. Some of the students’ responses are as captured below:

“The management of the institution does not value the students and the students does not get any information.” (14)

“I do not know because we as students are not even aware of what quality assurance is.” (13)

“Ignorance.” (10)

“The lack of public post about the programme lead to insufficient information about it.” (7)

### **Lack of visibility of the quality assurance and promotion unit in higher education institutions**

When asked whether they were aware of the existence of a Quality Assurance Directorate/Unit

in their institutions, the results showed a lack of awareness of the existence of an institutional quality assurance and promotion unit in their institutions. Captured below are some of the student responses:

“Quality Assurance and Promotion are hardly publicised. It is more like a secret unit.” (4)

“Students are not aware of the existence of the Quality Assurance unit and its policies.” (5)

“They act like a cult. Students don’t know what they do.” (6)

“Lack of transparency.” (10)

### **Lack of awareness about the institutional policies on quality assurance and promotion**

When students were asked whether their institution had a written policy on student participation on issues of quality assurance, most of the students were either unsure or did not know about the existence of quality assurance and promotion policies. The following responses from participants attest to this:

“I am not aware of any written policy.” (5)

“I don’t know about the policies.” (12)

“I cannot give an answer to something that I don’t know.” (3)

### **Students not knowing what role to play in quality assurance and promotion processes**

When students were asked about their involvement in quality assurance, they indicated that they did not know what role they should play in quality assurance and promotion. Their responses mainly centred on what they would have wanted to see happening. Below are some of their responses:

“The students should be involved in all activities that affect them and be allowed to have their views before it becomes official to avoid the conflict and must have a clear understanding of the participation so can be able to get involved.” (13)

“Please make students aware of the quality assurance, make them aware of these policies and involve students in the quality assurance and policies.” (10)

### **Possible solutions proffered by students pertaining to the challenges constraining their participation in quality assurance and promotion processes**

Participants came up with several ideas that they thought would help to improve their participation in quality assurance and promotion processes. The following were some of the

solutions highlighted by the study:

- There is a need to introduce quality assurance courses for students in order for them to have knowledge about it.
- Students should have a clear understanding of what they are participating in, to enable them to make meaningful contributions.
- They should have knowledge about institutional quality assurance policies.
- Students should be involved in decision-making processes.
- Every student should be encouraged to take quality assurance issues seriously.
- They should be regarded as important people who should be included in quality assurance and be allowed to make contributions.
- Students should be involved in all activities that affect them and be allowed to have their views known.
- There should be awareness programmes to get students to participate in quality assurance and promotion issues.

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings from this study confirmed that the value of involving students in quality assurance and promotion processes cannot be underscored. The factors that constrain student involvement in quality assurance and promotion, identified by the respondents, included a lack of understanding of what quality assurance and promotion is about, lack of information on the quality assurance and promotion processes, lack of an awareness of the existence of institutional quality assurance and promotion policies as well as students not knowing what role to play in quality assurance and promotion processes.

When students lack an understanding of what quality assurance and promotion is about, they cannot make meaningful contributions, and failure to do so disadvantages them. The inclusion of students in quality assurance processes is supported by the Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC 2009) baseline study *on participation of students in quality assurance*, which showed that there was a need for students to have a good understanding of issues of quality assurance and that they should be capacitated to participate meaningfully. Furthermore, the report emphasised the need to empower students to better understand the basic language of quality and the quality assurance, with the aim of enabling them to assess the accuracy of information that they receive from institutions; actively participate as “co-constructors” in shaping the quality of education inside higher education institutions; and

provide feedback that enables institutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as research and community engagement arrangements. This view is corroborated by Alaniska et al. (2006 cited by Ryan 2015) who postulate that students are important stakeholders in higher education, who have invested time and money in the system and have a special interest in the quality of the academic programme. Adding weight to the argument, Palomares (2014) states that student involvement in quality assurance processes influences the quality of higher education. Since students are at the receiving end of the higher education delivery chain, there is a need to have their views regarding their education not only listened to but implemented.

On the lack of information on quality assurance and promotion, the findings revealed that students lack information on quality assurance and promotion. Students were unanimous in that they needed more knowledge and information about quality assurance policies and practices to be better empowered to participate in discussions pertaining to those issues. Several students felt that their lack of involvement and playing a role in quality assurance were also related to their lack of knowledge about quality assurance issues. Naidoo (2004) argues that the most basic requirement for student participation is having access to information, which implies that institutions need to be more proactive in educating students about their role in quality assurance. For students to actively participate in quality assurance, they should be able to process the information and understand quality assurance language. When students have the relevant information and they understand the language used, they can debate issues and are also able to make informed decisions about their academic and future endeavours.

Student responses also reflected a lack of an awareness about the existence of institutional quality assurance and promotion policy. Most student participants had limited knowledge of the policies and mechanisms of quality assurance and the ways in which they could participate in quality assurance processes. The lack of an awareness of institutional policies on quality assurance does not necessarily mean that the two selected universities had no institutional policies in place. It might well be that because students had no knowledge on quality assurance, they did not have information on policies as well. The findings from the Quest Project run by the European Students' Union cited by Palomares (2014) showed a similar trend such as the one alluded to in the preceding statements. The findings from the Quest project showed that some students were not aware of several quality assurance and enhancement activities in place, particularly those at the European level. This is an important lesson for higher education institutions, that they should initiate awareness programmes to educate students on the resources that they have put in place and how these resources are accessible to them.

Findings also show that students do not know what role to play in Quality Assurance and

Promotion. Naidoo (2004) asserts that a major issue around the inclusion of students in quality assurance is that the space for their participation has not been clearly defined and that even in countries like India where the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has practised quality assurance for more than a decade, student involvement remains foreign. Cele (2007) believes that involving students as co-constructors provides a space for students to voice their experiences and judgements about quality in programmes and institutional arrangements. Secondly, it brings to the attention of institutional decision makers direct feedback on the quality of the total learning experience accorded to and received by students. Thirdly, it positions students to provide feedback on areas that warrant immediate responsiveness and those that assist the institution to conduct long-term planning. Fourthly, it encourages a dialogue between students, academics and institutional decision makers on strategies and mechanisms that can be adopted to improve quality. Fifthly, it assists students to understand the basic language of the quality discourse and the nomenclature of quality assurance in order to enable them to assess the accuracy of recruitment information that they receive during registration into programmes. Lastly, it enables students to make judgements about the quality of the total learning experience provided through learning programmes and other institutional mechanisms and systems.

The issues constraining the participation of students in quality assurance processes, identified by the participants, are fundamental points which when taken seriously, are bound to bring positive results in as far as students' participation is concerned. When students are part of the process of creating an enabling environment for their learning, they are likely to feel a sense of belonging and motivation, leading to their success.

### **Limitations of the study**

There are a few limitations inherent in this research study. First, this sample was drawn from two rural comprehensive universities in South Africa, with a very homogeneous population relative to the general Post School Education and Training (PSET) population. The sample selected for this study might not have been representative of the student population from the two universities making it difficult for the results of this study to be generalisable. Secondly, only a sample of the student population from the two universities that were available at the period of data collection, as it was time for registrations, and some senior students had not yet returned to campus, might have led to some form of bias. Thirdly, using a triangulation of research tools such as in-depth interview schedules and focus groups might have produced deeper insights regarding the issue of student engagement.

## CONCLUSION

The study brought to the fore the challenges that constrain the participation of students in quality assurance and promotion and their possible solutions. The challenges highlighted included a lack of understanding of what quality assurance and promotion was all about, lack of information on quality assurance processes, lack of awareness on the existence of institutional quality assurance policies and the quality assurance unit and lack of clearly defined roles they are supposed to play in quality assurance processes. Among the possible solutions to the challenges distilled from participants' responses were the need to design training programmes to capacitate students with knowledge on quality assurance and the processes involved, involvement of students in decision-making processes, institutional policies to be made available to students as well as the need to educate students on the role that they are supposed to play in quality assurance and promotion processes. This study adopted a student's as co-constructor's approach in defining quality assurance policy and practice. This approach advocates for students to be encouraged to review and shape the quality of the institution and its learning programmes as active participants and co-constructors, empowered to participate meaningfully in defining quality assurance policy and practice. Students need to be recognised as active participants and co-constructors in defining quality assurance policy and practice. Higher education institutions should therefore make a concerted effort to actively involve students in all quality assurance processes to enable them to benefit meaningfully from the processes, which is likely to lead to their academic success and development.

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