

The Institutional Strategy and Logic of Student Engagement in Higher Education Quality Assurance: A Case Study of A Scottish University

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ABSTRACT

In the context of massification in higher education, the role of the student has inspired both theoretical contributions and institutional implications, which is also embodied in a wide range of possibilities outlined for boosting student engagement in university governance. The previous study concentrated on the macro-level introduction to student engagement policies, but the attention to organizational strategies and logic at the university level was oddly silent. The current study adopted a qualitative research methodology to analyze the student engagement in the quality assurance processes at a Scotland university. The research findings showed that student representation and feedback mechanisms were facilitated as the student engagement strategies at the case university, and the corresponding pathways were to promote the student engagement in internal quality improvement and external quality evaluation, as well as to track feedback on student learning experiences. Further analysis found that from a Neo-liberalism perspective, the case university may have been driven by a combination of the capital logic and the achievement logic to make the above rational reactions. The initiatives mentioned may provide insights into the contexts of centralized higher education systems.

Keywords: student engagement, quality assurance, higher education, New Public Management, Institutional Logic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationally, higher education has witnessed an increasing massification to accommodate a wider range of stakeholders and student populations, resulting in a fundamental shift in the interaction among students, academia, and universities.

Quality assurance has received much attention in higher education during the last two decades, with the objective of quality control, improvement, and accountability. The past literature used to associate two terms-internal quality assurance, and external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance is defined as quality policies, strategies and mechanisms developed and implemented by an institution to ensure that it fulfills its purposes. External quality assurance refers to evaluation by an external body (e.g., an accrediting agency) to assess and determine whether that institution evaluated works for a series of agreed-upon standards and expectations.

The status of the student as a key stakeholder has inspired both theoretical contributions and institutional initiatives, which is also embodied in the missions and values of the universities. As a result, there will be a request to focus on multiple pathways that might be built to promote student participation at universities, given a wide range of possibilities identified among nations and regions.

The following is how the present paper is organized. We start by reviewing the literature on student engagement in higher education quality assurance, as well as the research gaps identified in the recent studies. Following the elaboration of two practice-based theoretical frameworks, the researcher independently refined an analytical tool. Based on a case study of a Scotland university, the above-proposed framework will discover the organizational approaches and policies to properly engage enrolled students in quality assurance processes. The paper will then explore the organizational

logic of the aforementioned strategies and initiatives from the perspective of Neo-liberalism Sociology. We end by suggesting suggestions for future research in centralized higher education systems like Confucian countries and as well mark the potential limitations of this case study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Student Engagement in Higher Education Quality Assurance

Influenced by New Public Management theory in the 1980s, student engagement, alternatively with other terms like student involvement or participation, raised widespread discussions on how to best include students in quality assurance systems in many regions around the globe. The current research sees the student engagement in organizational quality assurance as the student engaging in evaluating and enhancing the quality of their higher education institution, through mechanisms and approaches for carrying out specific activities [1]. A student may devote physical and psychological energy to academic experience during the involvement processes and socially interact with key stakeholders in the context of quality assurance systems.

2.2. Potential Existing Research Gaps

In previous studies, scholars have presented in detail the opportunities and challenges faced with the student participation in day-to-day classroom teaching and course evaluation, and have proposed suggestions and countermeasures for improving student participation from broad and theoretical perspectives, in an attempt to bring into play the important role of student participation in the quality assurance of higher education. However, it is not difficult to find that most of the existing studies focus on the policy introduction at the theoretical level, while the explanation and the analysis of the practical strategies and the action logic at the meso-level, need to be expanded; with regard to the role of students in different participation contexts, the existing studies focus on presupposing them as consumers of knowledge products, and the attributes of their roles as collaborators in quality improvement still need to be revealed.

The observation perspective of this current research was defined within the meso-level of higher education system-higher education organization. With this in mind, the research cast attention to the student engagement within the organizational quality assurance, and hoped to explore its practical strategies and implementation mechanisms, and then find out the incentive logic behind the phenomenon.

2.3. Analytical Framework

To develop an analysis of student engagement in quality assurance at an organizational level, the existing relevant studies were reviewed in this section, which aimed at building on their strengths but avoiding their weaknesses. Two of them (see Table 1) were proposed by Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (SPAQRS, 2004), and Palomares (2012). The first framework was exclusively targeted at student representatives in QAA Scotland but did not take the student group involved in the internal affairs of universities into account [2]. Although the Palomares framework presented the hierarchical dimensions of student involvement in quality processes, the practical pathways and case experiences kept silent, and its utility remained to be tested in different scenarios [3].

Table1. Theoretical Frameworks of Student Engagement in Quality Assurance Process

Framework Source	Engagement Dimensions	Engagement Approaches
SPAQRS (2004)	National external quality assurance agency	Opportunity, Attendance, Engagement
Palomares (2012)	Internal level, External level, QAA governance level	Providing information, Preparation of self-assessment reports, Taking up members of a review panel or/ and governance bodies

In this paper, an analytical framework refined from the literature reviews was presented with two dimensions: student engagement in internal quality enhancement, and student engagement in external quality evaluation. A case study was undertaken to discover the organizational strategies and practices in the sampled higher education institution, to define the implementation strategies and approaches, and the organizational logic incentives.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

To fill in the potential gaps mentioned, the case study approach was employed to answer “how” and “why” questions which required detailed descriptions of the examined samples in a prescribed context.

3.1. Sampling Case

The current research selected University W located in the western Scotland of the UK, as the preferred subjective. Among nearly 20 universities in Scotland, Case W is the largest public comprehensive university,

with the unbeatable top-ranked seat in the UK student learning satisfaction survey conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency. The University had passed the fourth quality audit (2017-22) in 2019 and was in the follow-up improvement phase. Its salience worked for the requirement of the case selection. Feasibility was prioritized in the design of research protocols. According to the “Gatekeeper” of qualitative research, the researcher was able to obtain the University’s internal information on the student engagement in the quality governance process.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The current research used documentary analysis for data collection, and the theoretical materials mainly comprised two sources. One came from the contextual published files through the University’s official website, comprising but unlimited to the quality evaluation reports, and the student partnership schemes. Another one was the official documents issued by the UK higher education system unlimited to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA Scotland), and the Scottish Student Partnership Quality Assurance Scheme (SPARQS). Besides the above, the other English-medium relevant reports, monographs, and dissertations were also included to assist the textual analysis of potential findings.

3.3. Data Analysis Methods

This study utilizes a thematic analysis approach to analyze the resulting text. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected qualitative data. The researcher began to categorize the practices of students’ participation at the University with the leading aspects of external quality assessment, and internal quality improvement. Then those practices were further coded through refining and defining, followed by the discussions of institutional logic behind the foreseen phenomenon. To enhance the reliability of the research conclusions, thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers in this project with professional knowledge, and the internal consistency between the generated themes and the coded nodes was also constantly reviewed.

4. FINDINGS

The Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) is the enhancement-led approach to quality in the Scotland universities, mainly emphasizing collaboration and partnership. There are five integrated elements in this innovation including Enhancement-Led Institutional Review, Institutional-Led Review, Student Engagement, Public Information, and Enhancement Themes [4]. The Framework highlights the importance of activating students’ role in shaping the quality of their education. Attributed to the above guidance the organizational

strategies were taken by University W to engage students within the internal quality enhancement, and the external quality evaluation.

4.1. The Strategy of Student Engagement in Internal Quality Enhancement

Student Representation within the case University is defined as a broad mechanism to get students involved in organizational quality processes and debates to provide qualitative feedback to create an excellent student experience and to increase the opportunities for students to excel. The above mechanism is considered imperative for application across all schools, campuses, and modes of course delivery. School Representation occurs on three levels: program (via Student Staff Liaison Groups), divisional (via Divisional Programmes Board), and school (via School Board).

At the program level, the Student-Staff Liaison Group (SSLG), which is typically chaired by a student representative, is a forum for students and staff to discuss student-led agendas on learning and teaching concerns, as well as to consult with students on future curriculum development plans. In terms of the school level, the School Board Committee takes the responsibility of supervising all academic provisions to ensure that its development, performance, and delivery are in accordance with the University policies and regulations. School Officers are elected from the school-wide constituency to carry out student representation mechanisms. Their role is to serve as a liaison between divisional level representatives and Students Union officers.

4.2. The Strategy of Student Engagement in External Quality Evaluation

The University reviewed all of its disciplines on a regular cycle, as expected by the Scottish Funding Council, and this internal review process was known as Institution-Led Review (ILR). Students could play an important role in a variety of crucial quality procedures, such as internal review, approval of new or modified programs, enhancement themes and the annual monitoring activities, and student feedback schemes.

The School informed all students of the ILR process through a flyer at the start of the session to ensure that all students are aware of the processes, how to participate with them, and the value of their involvement. The SSLG also serves as a platform for student input into a reflective document created by the subject team. A number of student feedback activities exist for the priority of students’ expectations, including module feedback mechanisms, completion of surveys (e.g., National Student Survey), and providing feedback via other informal feedback avenues.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Influenced by Neo-liberalism Sociology in the management field, the British higher education sector emphasizes market forces and highlights consumer rights and interests. This context makes the University comply with the marketed logic for showcasing accountability to the students' interests and maintaining the existing share of cultural capital in the legitimated market. Following this marketization rationale, the survey results of students' satisfaction gradually become a "golden" indicator in employment for judging the teaching quality in the higher education field. Within diverse global university rankings, the "remarkable" digit of students' satisfaction is also directly related to the employment competitiveness of tertiary graduates. There is no doubt that the public are confused by an illusion of the cluster of "good" higher education institutions in one region [5].

From the viewpoint of the "Triangular Coordination" by Clark, the quality assurance system in Scotland is expected to balance the conflicts among the three most important stakeholders, the council state, the academia, and the market. Although the University taken as the representative of academic power, is entrusted with administrative autonomy, the marketized indicators which are externally assessed and evaluated by QAA Scotland have quietly forced the University to cope with the external accountability and expectations. To a large extent, the results of the external reviews make visible effects on the organizational reputation, funding shares, students enrollment, facility reinvestment, and so forth. This performance-based accountability is strengthened by the student group who are concerned about the utility and output of their invested tuition fees [6]. Therefore, the rationales for the ongoing student engagement in the external quality evaluation of universities, do not merely result from the civic consciousness but also are induced by the considerations of personal economic interests and human capital benefits.

6. CONCLUSION

The current research not only explores the practical strategies and localization paths, and the implementation logic of student engagement in the quality assurance processes at the organizational level. The research concludes that the student representation and the information feedback mechanism are the localization strategies for the student partnership principle in the case, and these strategies promote students' engagement in internal quality improvement, external quality assessment, and feedback on the learning experience. The organizational rational response is generated from an integrated and complex logic network consisting of the power within marketization, performance, and academy.

7. INSIGHTS

The initiatives mentioned above may add insights to the organizational strategies within the context of the centralized education administration in Confucian countries: the institutional support and measures for student engagement into quality management are hoped to be strengthened; the organizational advantages of student associations in gathering consensus should be highlighted, and a partnership collaboration based on quality agencies and communities expects to be agenda.

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