THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION AND THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

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Abstract: Within the framework of European policies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, promoted at supranational level by ENQA, Students participation is considered a structural element of university evaluation and continuous improvement processes. In addition to meeting regulatory requirements, such participation has a clear educational value, constituting a formative experience capable of developing skills relevant to the academic citizenship and future professionalism of the students involved. This paper analyses Students participation in quality assurance systems, taking the European Standards and Guidelines as a reference and proposing the Italian case of the Self-Assessment, Evaluation and Accreditation (AVA) procedures devised by ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes) as an example of the national implementation of European policies. The focus is on the role of Students Evaluation Experts (SEV), understood as active participants in situated learning, co-responsibility and Peer training. The contribution adopts a theoretical framework oriented towards a reflective-experiential approach based on the analysis of active representation practices, Peer Training courses and feedback activities, which show how the involvement of Students in QA processes can promote the development of transversal skills such as critical thinking, evaluation skills, institutional communication and the assumption of responsibility in the organizations where they work. In conclusion, the contribution proposes interpreting Quality Assurance processes as learning environments and university governance as an advanced pedagogical space, in which Students participation contributes to the construction of a European culture of quality based on awareness, participation and skills development. Finally, the article proposes a reflection that recognizes Quality Assurance processes as learning environments and university governance as an advanced educational space, promoting a culture of quality based on informed participation, skills development and shared responsibility.
Keywords: Educational Accountability; educational dimension; Students participation; Peer Training; Quality Assurance; Students Assessment Experts

1. Introduction

In the contemporary context of higher education, Quality Assurance (QA) systems have gradually established themselves as central devices for regulating, monitoring and improving the educational and organizational processes of university institutions. This statement cannot be understood without reference to the broader framework of reform initiated at European level since the Bologna Process, which promoted the construction of the European

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Higher Education Area as a shared space for cooperation, comparability and mutual trust between national systems. In this scenario, quality has not been conceived exclusively as a technical requirement or procedural compliance, but as a structural dimension of university policies, aimed at ensuring transparency, accountability and social legitimacy of institutional action towards internal and external stakeholders.

The adoption of *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) represented, in this perspective, a decisive step towards the definition of a common language and shared principles on quality, focusing on a systemic approach based on continuous improvement and the active participation of the actors involved. The ESG, developed within the framework of policies promoted by ENQA and the main European organizations in the sector, have progressively contributed to redefining quality not as a static outcome, but as a dynamic and reflective process, closely linked to the ability of institutions to learn from their own practices and adapt to changes in the social, economic and cultural context (ENQA, 2015).

Within this regulatory and cultural framework, the significant role of Students participation in QA processes has become increasingly clear in recent years. Students are now recognized as individuals who can contribute significantly to the design, evaluation and monitoring of educational provision, not only as recipients of educational services, but also as bearers of an irreplaceable experiential perspective for understanding teaching and learning processes.

This recognition, formally enshrined in the ESG in their 2015 revision, has fostered a gradual evolution in the role of Students, who are increasingly seen less as 'customers' of the university system and more as co-responsible actors in internal and external evaluation mechanisms.

Alongside the procedural dimension of participation, however, a particularly important perspective is opening for Educational Sciences and for educational reflection in a broad sense, namely the possibility of interpreting Quality Assurance processes as learning contexts and Students participation as an intentional educational experience. In this light, QA can be seen not only as a set of guarantee and control tools, but as a complex educational environment in which reflective practices, decision-making processes and dynamics of individual and collective empowerment are intertwined. This interpretation makes it possible to overcome a reductive view of quality as mere regulatory compliance, instead enhancing its formative and transformative potential.

The involvement of Students in governance bodies and active assessment mechanisms activates situated learning processes that foster the development of transversal and professional skills that are difficult to acquire through curricular pathways alone. Participation in QA processes requires and, at the same time, promotes data reading and interpretation skills, critical thinking, communication skills in complex institutional contexts, and the assumption of responsibility in decision-making processes.

In this sense, QA can be understood as an advanced Training environment, capable of significantly impacting the personal, civic and professional development of the students involved, in line with a conception of learning as an experiential and reflective process (Kolb, 2014).

In the Italian context, the Self-Assessment, Evaluation and Accreditation (AVA) system and the policies promoted by ANVUR have progressively strengthened the role of Students in evaluation and accreditation processes, recognizing their contribution both internally, through participation in the self-assessment activities of degree programs, the Joint Teacher-Students Committees and the Quality Assurance Committees, and externally, through their involvement in the Evaluation Expert Committees. This is the context in which the figure for the Students Evaluation Expert (SEV) fits in, assuming a particularly significant role not only at the operational level, but also at the educational and Training level. Students who develop assessment skills through direct experience in QA processes function as mediators between the university institution and the Students community, as well as facilitators of Peer Training courses. The SEV experience highlights how structured and informed participation in university governance produces transferable learning that can also be used in non-academic professional contexts. The organizational, evaluative, communicative and ethical skills that emerge from such experiences are relevant not only for the effective functioning of quality systems, but also for the *employability* of graduates and the formation of critical, aware and responsible citizens who are able to act within complex organizations. In this perspective, Peer Training practices (Campanella, 2025) and active representation workshops play a strategic role in transforming Students participation from occasional or merely formal experience in intentional educational pathways.

These mechanisms help to strengthen a culture of quality based on shared responsibility, reflection and informed participation, promoting a deeper internalization of the principles underlying QA systems and greater awareness of their pedagogical value.

This contribution fits within this theoretical and institutional framework and aims to analyze the educational dimension of Students participation in Quality Assurance processes, with particular attention to the role of SEVs as educational actors and as a strategic resource for university governance. Through a reflective-experiential approach, which integrates the analysis of practices with the author's direct experience in national and international evaluation contexts, the article aims to show how QA systems can be interpreted as learning devices and as privileged spaces for the development of professional and civic skills, contributing to the construction of a genuinely participatory culture of quality.

2. Students' participation as an educational experience in governance processes

From a pedagogical perspective, Students participation in quality assurance processes can be interpreted as a form of situated learning that develops within the context of university governance. In this context, the bodies and mechanisms responsible for quality are not exclusively technical forums for decision-making, control and reporting, but gradually take on the function of informal educational environments, in which learning takes shape through direct involvement in evaluative, reflective and deliberative practices. Academic governance thus becomes a space in which Students observe, participate and engage with institutional actors with distinct roles, languages and responsibilities.

Within these contexts, Students are called upon to develop complex skills relating to the understanding of organizational processes, the interpretation of data and the critical evaluation of teaching practices. Participation in the work of the Joint Teacher-Students Committees, Quality Assurance Officers and Evaluation Units promotes the acquisition of

transversal skills related to reading institutional documents, analyzing self-evaluation reports, formulating proposals for improvement and mediating between sometimes divergent demands. These skills are particularly relevant in a university education focused on developing responsibility, institutional awareness and active citizenship, helping to strengthen the role of Students as co-responsible participants in decision-making processes. In this context, providing feedback to Students involved in Quality Assurance processes is particularly important. Sharing the decisions taken, the actions undertaken and the results obtained make it possible to highlight the impact of Students' contribution, strengthening the sense of belonging to the academic community and the perception of the effectiveness of participation. The availability of structured and comprehensible feedback encourages informed and motivated participation, transforming involvement in QA mechanisms into an educational experience that can influence both the quality of decision-making processes and the evolution of university governance.

When accompanied by appropriate Training and clearly defined roles, Students participation also helps to promote a culture of quality based on shared responsibility. In this perspective, the role of Students in Quality Assurance processes has been progressively recognized and strengthened in the evolution of national and European models, moving from forms of episodic consultation to modes of active and participatory involvement. As Refrigeri (2017) observes, the participatory approach to evaluation is based on the recognition of Students as individuals capable of contributing significantly to the co-design and continuous updating of internal QA processes. This approach values Student's contribution not only in terms of information, but also as an intentional learning experience, capable of generating reflective learning and evaluative skills (Carci, 2023).

The involvement of Students in governance processes raises the broader issue of *Students voice* in evaluation mechanisms. The growing attention paid to this dimension by higher education institutions testifies to a progressive recognition of the value of Students participation not only as a right, but also as a strategic resource for educational and organizational innovation. *Students Voice* represents an opportunity for Students to express their opinions, proposals and evaluations of their educational experience in a structured way, contributing to the construction of quality systems that are truly participatory and oriented towards continuous improvement (Carci, 2023).

The perception that Students develop towards Quality Assurance processes, sometimes characterized by a distance from direct educational experience, can be interpreted considering the concept of quality culture. As highlighted by Del Gobbo (2021), the term 'culture' refers to a complex set of shared values, norms and practices that define quality not as a mere system of procedures, but as the collective responsibility of the entire academic community.

In this context, Quality Assurance is called upon to move beyond a formal or regulatory compliance-oriented approach and become a dynamic and participatory process capable of engaging Students, teachers and technical-administrative staff in a process of shared reflection and organizational learning. In this sense, QA contributes to the definition of institutional policies and strategies, the management of resources and processes, and the monitoring of results, with the aim of creating public value and responding effectively to the needs of society and the world of work.

Understood as a tool for collective awareness and learning, Quality Assurance strengthens the link between the University and society and guides the University towards a vision of sustainable institutional and human development, within which university governance is configured as a context of shared learning, in which quality is built through continuous dialogue between Students, teachers and governing bodies.

3. Students Evaluation Experts as educational mediators

Within Quality Assurance systems, the role of Students Evaluation Experts (SEVs) represents a significant evolution in the role of Students in university governance processes. SEVs are Students who, through continuous involvement in QA mechanisms and participation in specific Training courses, acquire advanced skills in assessment, organization and communication. This experience enables them to function as mediators between the Students community and institutional structures, extending their role beyond the scope of formal assessment and contributing to the educational dimension of quality processes.

SEVs actively participate in internal and external evaluation processes, contributing to the critical reading of evidence, the analysis of results and the formulation of shared judgements. Through these activities, they develop skills that include the ability to operate in multidisciplinary contexts, to take on decision-making responsibilities and to communicate effectively with different interlocutors. These skills are relevant not only to the functioning of quality systems, but also to the professional Training of the Students involved, as they promote the development of a reflective attitude and a systemic view of complex organizations.

A central element of the SEV's role is *Peer training*. Through active representation workshops, training meetings and support activities, SEVs contribute to the training of new Students representatives, facilitating understanding of quality assurance processes and promoting informed and responsible participation. *Peer Training* practices allow for the dissemination of evaluation skills within the students community, strengthening the sustainability of quality systems and promoting the continuity of good practices over time.

The author's experience in national and international evaluation contexts, such as the accreditation procedures promoted by ANVUR, participation in the activities of the European Students' Union and involvement in international evaluations on behalf of agencies such as FIBAA, shows how the role of SEVs contributes to strengthening the educational dimension of Quality Assurance. Exposure to heterogeneous models of governance and evaluation promotes the development of a comparative and critical vision, which is useful both for the improvement of institutional processes and for the personal and professional growth of Students.

From this perspective, SEVs can be interpreted as facilitators of quality and as a strategic resource for their respective universities. Their actions contribute to making quality assurance processes more understandable, participatory and improvement-oriented, promoting a culture of quality that recognizes the educational value of participation and the centrality of the skills developed through the evaluation experience.

4. Educational dimension of Quality Assurance Processes

Students' participation in quality assurance processes can be interpreted as a complex educational experience, capable of generating meaningful learning that transcends the

immediate goal of improving study programs. When Students are involved in a structured way in self-assessment, monitoring and review activities, they meet organizational and decision-making practices that require critical processing of information, understanding of institutional mechanisms and assumption of responsibility towards the academic community. From this perspective, Quality Assurance is a situated learning context in which skills emerge from the interaction between experience, reflection and action.

Typical QA activities, such as analyzing teaching data, reading self-assessment reports, participating in joint committees and engaging with teachers and governance structures, encourage the development of methodological and docimological skills. These skills relate to the ability to interpret quantitative and qualitative indicators and to understand the relationships between educational objectives, learning outcomes and teaching organization. The literature highlights how these skills represent an essential dimension of contemporary university education, as they promote the development of critical thinking and institutional awareness (Refrigeri, 2017; Kivistö & Pekkola, 2017).

In addition to the evaluative dimension, participation in Quality Assurance processes promotes communication and interpersonal skills that are central to both university governance and professional contexts. The students involved are called upon to interact with different interlocutors, to mediate between often divergent demands and to translate technical information into language accessible to the Students community. This continuous exercise in institutional communication contributes to the development of negotiation skills, active listening and feedback, strengthening the role of the students as an active and aware participant in the decision-making process. In this sense, Students participation in Quality Assurance processes takes on an educational value that extends to the development of transferable skills that can be used in professional careers. The skills developed through evaluation experience, such as the ability to work in a team, manage complex processes and take on responsibility, are consistent with the skills required in contemporary work contexts. Making this educational dimension visible means recognizing the contribution of QA not only to the quality of study programs, but also to the overall educational mission of the University, understood as a space for the integral formation of the person and the development of civic and professional skills (Refrigeri & Palladino, 2019; OECD, 2020).

5. The role of students in peer training methodology

Within Quality Assurance processes, SEVs play a key role in systematically connecting the assessment dimension with the Training dimension. The experience gained by SEVs in university governance contexts and assessment mechanisms allows them to position themselves between the institution and the Students community, promoting the circulation of knowledge, understanding of processes and the dissemination of assessment skills. From this perspective, *Peer Training* is a privileged educational strategy for making Students participation not only more widespread, but also more informed, competent and sustainable over time. *Peer Training* is a learning method based on sharing experiences and valuing knowledge gained in informal and non-formal contexts. Through their direct involvement in Quality Assurance processes, SEVs acquire operational and interpretative knowledge that is difficult to convey through formal or documentary means alone.

Peer Training allows this implicit knowledge to be transformed into explicit knowledge that can be communicated and negotiated within the Students community, thus strengthening Students' ability to interpret their role in QA bodies and to act in an informed and responsible manner. This is the direction taken by the active representation workshops and *Peer Training*activities conducted by the author, which took place in Florence on 9 December 2025. These Training initiatives provided opportunities for reflective discussion on concrete cases of simulated evaluation processes and analysis of institutional practices, promoting a deeper understanding of the logic governing university governance. Through these tools, participating Students were able to acquire conceptual and operational tools useful for overcoming a purely bureaucratic view of quality assurance processes, developing instead an approach oriented towards continuous improvement and institutional co-responsibility.

The author's direct experience as a Students representative and SEV highlights how Peer Training also contributes significantly to strengthening the sense of efficacy perceived by the Students involved. The opportunity to understand how decision-making processes work, to observe how evaluations are translated into concrete improvements, and to recognize the impact of one's own contribution encourages greater motivation to participate and consolidates a sense of responsibility towards the academic community. In this sense, *Peer Training* is not limited to the transmission of technical or procedural skills, but promotes attitudes of active citizenship, institutional commitment and critical awareness, in line with the literature that interprets quality as a participatory and shared culture (Fondazione CRUI, 2012; Mortari et al., 2021). The educational relevance of the role of SEVs is also particularly clear in international evaluation contexts, where comparison with different models of Quality Assurance encourages the development of a reflective and comparative approach. Involvement in Evaluation processes promoted by bodies such as ANVUR, the European Students' Union and FIBAA allow SEVs to meet diverse approaches to governance and quality assessment, broadening their interpretative and methodological repertoire. These experiences fuel critical reflection on practices adopted at national and international levels and enable the transfer of learning gained in Students Training courses, strengthening the educational dimension of participation.

This circularity between evaluation experience, critical reflection and Peer Training is one of the key elements in consolidating the pedagogical value of Quality Assurance processes. As Training mediators, SEVs help to make QA more accessible and understandable, promoting a culture of quality based on informed participation, shared responsibility and recognition of the skills developed through experience. In this perspective, *Peer Training* is not an ancillary activity, but a strategic tool for integrating the evaluation dimension with the educational mission of the university.

6. Accountability, feedback and learning organizational

A key element in fully enhancing Students participation in Quality Assurance processes is the ability of universities to ensure effective closure of the feedback cycle. The structured and transparent feedback of assessment results to the Students involved is, in fact, an essential condition for QA processes to be interpreted as opportunities for organizational learning. In this perspective, the data collected and the assessments expressed are not confined to a descriptive or certifying function but become cognitive tools through which to understand

institutional dynamics, reflect on the practices adopted and guide future decisions.

In this context, accountability cannot be reduced to mere formal fulfilment or an exercise in external reporting but must be understood as an educational practice that makes responsibilities, decision-making processes and the effects of the choices made visible. When institutions communicate the results of evaluations and the improvement actions taken in a clear and accessible manner, they help to strengthen Students' trust in the Quality Assurance system and legitimize their participation. The ability to observe the link between the contribution made and the decisions taken allows Students to give meaning to their participation, transforming it into an experience of reflective learning and civic empowerment.

The literature on the subject highlights how transparency and feedback are essential elements in promoting a sustainable and shared culture of quality. In particular, the documents produced by ANVUR emphasize the importance of making the results of evaluation processes visible and systematically monitoring the implementation of improvement actions to avoid the risk of purely symbolic participation (ANVUR, 2024). Similarly, the European Students' Union highlights how Students' involvement can only be effective if there are clear and timely feedback mechanisms in place, capable of demonstrating the concrete impact of *Students Voice* on decision-making processes (ESU, 2023).

In this context, monitoring the effects of Students participation practices plays a strategic role in the development of organizational learning. Systematic observation of the educational and organizational outcomes of QA activities provides insight into the extent to which participation contributes not only to the improvement of study programs, but also to the development of the skills of the Students involved. An empirical approach based on the analysis of experiences and critical reflection makes it possible to avoid the risk of self-referentiality and to produce useful evidence for guiding governance policies in a more conscious and informed manner (Refrigeri & Palladino, 2019).

Furthermore, feedback encourages the development of a metacognitive perspective in Students, who are called upon to reflect not only on the results of assessments, but also on the processes through which these results are constructed and used. In this sense, participation in Quality Assurance processes encourages Students to move beyond a linear and passive view of their role and place themselves within a circular learning process that involves the entire academic community. Students are no longer merely recipients of decisions, but conscious actors in a complex system in which quality emerges from the interaction between assessment, action and reflection.

Understood in this way, accountability contributes to redefining the relationship between the institution and Students, promoting a more inclusive governance oriented towards collective learning. QA thus becomes a space in which reporting is intertwined with training, and feedback is used as a pedagogical lever to strengthen the culture of quality, shared responsibility and a sense of belonging to the university community.

7. Conclusions and future prospectives

Considering European policies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, as outlined by the European Standards and Guidelines and promoted by ENQA, this paper proposes a reinterpretation of Quality Assurance processes as learning environments in which Students

participation takes on a structural pedagogical value. From this perspective, QA is not exclusively a tool for regulation and control, but a Training device capable of combining institutional improvement and the development of individual skills. Placing Students at the centre of Quality Assurance processes means recognizing them as active participants and co-responsible for the improvement of study programs.

The structured involvement of Students in self-assessment, evaluation and accreditation processes allows for the integration of experiential perspectives on the organization of teaching and teaching-learning processes into decision-making mechanisms, generating concrete added value for the quality of educational provision. In this sense, Students participation contributes not only to the transparency and effectiveness of QA systems, but also to their ability to truly focus on continuous improvement.

At the same time, the analysis highlights how participation in Quality Assurance processes has a direct educational impact on the Students involved, promoting the development of particularly important personal and transversal skills. Assessment skills, critical thinking, data reading and interpretation, institutional communication, collaborative work and responsibility emerge as significant learning outcomes, gained through experiences of university governance and fully consistent with the profiles required in contemporary professional contexts.

In this context, the role of Students Evaluation Experts is a strategic resource for universities, as they can mediate between the evaluation and educational dimensions. Through Peer Training and feedback practices, SEVs contribute to the dissemination of a culture of participatory quality, strengthening the sustainability of QA systems and the sense of shared responsibility within the academic community.

Finally, fully recognizing the educational value of Students participation implies a rethinking of institutional policies: investing in the Training of the Students involved, formalizing roles, ensuring the effective closure of feedback cycles and systematically monitoring the educational outcomes of participation are essential conditions for democratic, sustainable and learning-oriented quality. In this direction, Quality Assurance can become a real driver for the improvement of study programs and the development of Students' transversal skills, strengthening the role of the University as a responsible and generative educational community.

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