

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES IN ITALY

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the role of students in the quality assurance (QA) processes of the Italian university system by examining the Periodic Accreditation Reports (RAP) prepared by the Expert Evaluation Committees under the AVA 3 model. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach with a qualitative focus, based on a documentary analysis of the RAPs published by ANVUR, supported by generative Artificial Intelligence tools and subsequently integrated through quantitative coding of the collected evidence. Four indicators were developed regarding the inclusion, active participation, proactivity, and consideration of student concerns in QA processes. The results highlight statistically significant differences among the various types of universities, with reference to online universities, which exhibit lower levels of involvement compared to public universities. The study highlights the need to strengthen student participation as a structural requirement of QA systems and suggests possible developments of the AVA model from a more student-centered perspective.*

Keywords: *Quality Assurance; student participation; AVA 3; university governance; periodic accreditation.*

1. Introduction

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on Quality Assurance (QA) in European and Italian higher education, a discussion that began with the Bologna Process and has gradually taken shape within a framework of convergence among university systems toward common standards shared within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This process has helped redefine how university systems are governed, placing increasing emphasis on Quality Assurance mechanisms as tools for regulating, monitoring, and continuously improving university education.

In this context, the Italian Quality Assurance system has undergone a significant evolution since the 1990s, beginning with the introduction of the first institutional evaluation tools and culminating in the subsequent establishment of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System (ANVUR) in 2011 (Serafino, 2018). This process led to the implementation of the AVA system (Self-Assessment, Periodic Evaluation, and Accreditation), which has further evolved into its AVA 3.0 configuration, in line with European quality guidelines and the need to strengthen internal processes of continuous improvement.

Within this framework of quality assurance policy reform, attention has gradually shifted toward the quality of education and the role of those involved in educational processes, particularly faculty and students.

In fact, ANVUR guidelines and the relevant literature highlight the need to promote student-centered systems, in which students do not assume an exclusively receptive role but actively participate in the processes of identifying, analysing, and improving teaching practices. From this perspective, student involvement is seen as a strategic lever for strengthening the quality of degree programs and for developing processes of co-construction of educational practices.

The AVA 3.0 system confirms this orientation, emphasizing self-assessment processes and the empowerment of various institutional actors—including students—in building quality. In particular, the importance of integrating teaching and research is reaffirmed, as is the need for a comprehensive system of internal procedures for the design, management, monitoring, and improvement of educational activities, supplemented by periodic external peer reviews. Within this framework, the quality of Education is increasingly viewed as the outcome of a systemic and participatory process that actively involves the academic community.

At the same time, the educational literature emphasizes that student involvement in assessment and self-assessment processes represents a significant source of information for identifying critical issues and implementing improvement measures (Pasquali, 2025). Student perceptions are, in fact, essential for understanding how undergraduate and doctoral programs function. In this regard, the involvement of student representatives (Pasquali, 2025) is viewed not only as a tool for gathering data but also as a pedagogically generative mechanism (Campanella, 2025) for professional development and educational innovation.

It is also necessary to consider how the structural and organizational characteristics of universities can significantly impact students' opportunities to participate in quality assurance processes. The size of the institution, the structure of the academic programs, the geographical distribution of campuses, the composition of the student body, and the degree of consolidation of governance structures can, in fact, influence both the dissemination of information regarding QA and the ways in which students are involved in decision-making and evaluation processes. In particular, at large universities or those characterized by significant organizational complexity, the risk of participation that is formal but lacks substance may be greater, whereas smaller institutions may foster forms of direct involvement and closer relationships among students, faculty, and governing bodies. The legal status of the university is therefore a key factor in understanding the actual implementation of quality assurance (QA) policies and the degree of student participation in quality improvement processes.

Although the regulatory framework and institutional guidelines explicitly provide for an active role for students in QA processes, there remains room for further analysis regarding the specific ways in which such participation is implemented in Italian university contexts. In particular, it is not always clearly defined how universities structure the tools, practices, and organizational forms aimed at ensuring effective and systemic student involvement in governance and quality assurance processes.

Based on these premises, this paper aims to analyse the ways in which students are involved in university governance and quality assurance processes, with particular attention to the practices adopted by universities, the tools used to facilitate participation, and the organizational structures through which such involvement translates into decision-making and teaching improvement processes, through a systematic review of the Periodic Accreditation Reports (RAP) published by ANVUR during the AVA 3 evaluation model. The objective is to contribute to an understanding of the actual role of students within QA systems, highlighting the dynamics through which student participation is structured and implemented in university contexts.

2.State of the Art

Beginning in the 1990s, Europe underwent a profound transformation in the field of higher education, known as the “Bologna Process.” Formally launched in 1999 with the Bologna Declaration signed by the Ministers of Education of numerous European countries, this process aimed to build a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on shared principles of transparency, degree comparability, student and academic staff mobility, mutual recognition of educational pathways, and the promotion of the quality of higher education provision (Serafino, 2018). Achieving these objectives required the gradual convergence of national university systems which, while retaining their institutional and regulatory autonomy, were called upon to adopt common tools and criteria in

order to ensure comparable quality standards and foster mutual trust among European higher education institutions.

Within this framework, Quality Assurance (QA) became a central issue in European higher education policies. From the first ministerial meetings following the Bologna Declaration, quality was progressively recognized as a strategic element for ensuring the reliability of university systems and supporting the construction of the EHEA. A particularly significant milestone was reached in 2005 with the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in cooperation with the main European organizations representing the higher education sector, including the European University Association (EUA), the European Students' Union (ESU), and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

The ESG remain the principal European reference framework for Quality Assurance and define principles, standards, and guidelines aimed at promoting the continuous improvement of higher education institutions. They are based on several fundamental assumptions, including the centrality of student learning and educational experience, the primary responsibility of institutions for the quality of their own processes, the transparency of assessment procedures, and the need to develop evidence-based monitoring and continuous improvement systems. The 2015 revision of the ESG further strengthened these principles, emphasizing the role of students as active partners in the design, evaluation, and improvement of educational provision.

In parallel, ENQA has played a fundamental role in consolidating a European quality culture through the definition of shared methodologies for external evaluation and the promotion of cooperation among national evaluation agencies. The EUA, for its part, has contributed to the development of institutionally oriented quality approaches through research, support, and guidance for European universities in strategic governance and organizational improvement processes. The combined action of these bodies has progressively encouraged a shift from a conception of quality understood primarily as administrative control to a perspective oriented toward institutional development, accountability, and the enhancement of self-assessment practices.

A further regulatory development occurred in 1999 with the establishment of the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU), which absorbed and expanded the functions previously assigned to the OVSU. The CNVSU contributed to the dissemination of increasingly structured evaluation practices and to the definition of indicators useful for monitoring university performance. Subsequently, in 2004, the Italian Committee for the Evaluation of Research (CIVR) was established with the aim of promoting the periodic evaluation of research activities and fostering greater integration between evaluation processes concerning teaching and those relating to scientific production.

The progressive consolidation of European quality policies and the growing need to coordinate the various evaluation activities led, in 2011, to the establishment of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research (ANVUR), which assumed the functions previously carried out by the existing national bodies. The creation of ANVUR represented a crucial step in the consolidation of Quality Assurance in Italy, as it made it possible to develop an integrated evaluation system consistent with European orientations and with the principles defined by the ESG.

Against this backdrop, the introduction in 2013 of the AVA system (Self-assessment, Periodic Evaluation and Accreditation) was conceived as a tool designed to ensure the continuous improvement of the quality of teaching, research, and third mission activities. The AVA system gradually assumed a central role in the governance of Italian universities, promoting a quality culture based on the systematic collection of evidence, the monitoring of performance indicators, and the activation of cyclical processes of planning, verification, and improvement. Subsequent revisions of the model, culminating in the most recent AVA 3 version, further strengthened alignment between the national system and European orientations. In particular, greater emphasis was placed on self-assessment processes, strategic quality management, and the integration of teaching, research, and

third mission activities, recognizing the importance of contributions from the various internal and external stakeholders of the university.

In this context of renewal in QA practices, national educational organizations have progressively devoted increasing attention to the quality of education and training (Felisatti et al., 2019). The various guidelines issued by ANVUR indeed underscore that quality cannot be regarded solely as the outcome of administrative procedures or external review processes but must be conceived as a shared responsibility of the entire academic community. From this perspective, the student-centered paradigm assumes particular relevance, as promoted both by the ESG and by European and national strategic documents, which recognize students as privileged interlocutors in the design, monitoring, and improvement of educational provision.

The centrality of the student represents one of the most innovative features of contemporary Quality Assurance policies. Students are no longer considered mere recipients of educational services, but active participants called upon to contribute to the definition of educational policies and to the identification of organizational and teaching-related critical issues. Through participation in collegiate bodies, Joint Teacher-Student Committees, Quality Assurance Presidiums, and student opinion surveys, students can provide essential information for the continuous improvement of degree programmes and university structures.

Although the normative and regulatory framework provides for significant student involvement in QA processes, the literature shows that numerous critical issues remain regarding the effective implementation of these principles within higher education institutions. In particular, it is still not sufficiently clear which strategies universities adopt to promote informed and continuous student participation in Quality Assurance processes, nor to what extent such practices are able to influence organizational decisions and institutional improvement policies (Carci and Nirchi, 2023). These issues therefore make it necessary to further investigate the relationship between the organizational models adopted by Italian universities and the actual opportunities for participation offered to students, considering the principles promoted by the European and national Quality Assurance framework.

3.Theoretical Framework

Quality Assurance (QA) now represents one of the cornerstones of higher education governance policies in Europe. Since the Bologna Process, launched in 1999, national university systems have been progressively required to develop shared models for the evaluation and continuous improvement of quality, aimed at ensuring transparency, comparability of study pathways, and institutional accountability within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). From this perspective, quality is understood as a dynamic and participatory process of institutional development.

In the Italian context, this evolution has translated into the gradual structuring of bodies and procedures dedicated to the evaluation of the university system, culminating in the establishment of ANVUR and the introduction of the AVA system (Self-assessment, Periodic Evaluation and Accreditation). The most recent AVA 3.0 framework confirms the orientation toward a quality culture based on the integration of teaching, research, and third mission activities, assigning particular importance to self-assessment processes and to the involvement of the various actors within the academic community.

Within this framework, the student-centered paradigm has progressively assumed a central position in European and national Quality Assurance policies. The European Quality Assurance Guidelines and ANVUR documents in fact emphasize the need to recognize students as active participants in the design, monitoring, and improvement of educational provision. This perspective moves beyond the conception of students as mere recipients of educational services, instead recognizing them as internal stakeholders and partners in quality development processes.

International pedagogical literature (Campanella, 2025, pp. 3–5; Perotto, 2025; Monfardini, 2021) highlights how student involvement in evaluation processes constitutes a strategic resource for

identifying organizational and pedagogical criticalities and for developing evidence-based improvement interventions. Students' perceptions of their own learning, teaching practices, the organization of study programmes, and support services represent an essential source of information for quality governance. At the same time, numerous studies (Campanella, 2025; Pasquali, 2025) underline how structured forms of participation may foster co-construction of decisions, strengthen students' sense of belonging to the academic community, and contribute to the development of a shared quality culture.

Despite the normative and theoretical recognition of student participation as a key feature of QA systems, the literature shows that questions remain regarding the concrete ways in which such involvement is implemented within higher education institutions.

A further area of interest concerns the relationship between the organizational characteristics of universities and student participation in Quality Assurance processes. At times, an institution's structural configuration significantly affects students' opportunities to engage in decision-making, evaluative, and governance processes. University size, territorial distribution, organizational model, and modes of teaching delivery may in fact influence both access to information concerning QA and the possibilities for active student participation.

In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the comparison between different types of higher education institutions, including online universities, where forms of student representation and participation may take different shapes compared with traditional universities. In addition, in universities with a legal status different from that of state institutions, institutional statutes may not provide for student representation in certain governance and QA bodies; such heterogeneity, not explicitly regulated by Ministerial Decree 1154/2021, risks producing unequal treatment of student representatives across institutions.

Analysing the relationship between organizational arrangements and student involvement therefore makes it possible to examine the conditions that foster or limit the effective implementation of the participation principles promoted by Quality Assurance systems.

4. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design with a qualitative predominance, in which document analysis constitutes the primary phase of investigation and is subsequently complemented by a quantitative coding procedure applied to the evidence emerging from the qualitative analysis.

The study examines all Evaluation Reports (*Rapporti di Accreditamento Periodico*, RAP) produced by the Evaluation Expert Committees (*Commissioni di Esperti della Valutazione*, CEV) within the framework of the AVA 3 model and made publicly available by ANVUR. These documents were selected as the primary source of analysis because of their institutional relevance and their evaluative value in relation to the Quality Assurance processes implemented by Italian universities. RAPs are the outcome of an external evaluation process that assesses quality management structures, governance practices, monitoring systems, and the modalities through which internal and external stakeholders, including students, are involved in institutional processes.

The aim of the study is to explore how student participation is described, valued, and integrated within Quality Assurance and university governance processes, as well as to understand the extent to which different institutional configurations may influence opportunities for student involvement.

Case selection was conducted across the various institutional categories without assuming any a priori hypotheses regarding the individual universities considered. Consequently, the focus of the research is not the evaluation of the performance of specific institutions, but rather the identification of recurring patterns and potential differences associated with the legal status and institutional nature of universities. The analysis was limited to those sections of the RAPs containing explicit or implicit references to student participation in Quality Assurance processes, both at the institutional level and, more specifically, within Departments and Degree Programmes. Attention was paid to evidence concerning student representation in governance and QA bodies, student involvement in self-

assessment and review processes, consultation activities, forms of participation in decision-making processes related to the improvement of teaching quality and student services, and participation in training and orientation activities concerning Quality Assurance.

Document analysis was supported by the generative artificial intelligence tool NotebookLM (Palladino, 2025), which was employed to assist in the identification, extraction, and organization of relevant information contained in the RAPs. The tool was not used as a substitute for the researcher's interpretation; rather, it served as support for the preliminary coding phase and the systematization of the collected data. The validation of the extracted information and the final interpretation of the findings were carried out by the researcher through a critical and comparative reading of the documents. Subsequently, four indicators were developed by the researcher to assess the level of student involvement in Quality Assurance (QA) processes. Each indicator was measured using a five-point Likert scale and operationalized as reported in *Table 1*:

Table 1: Explanation of Indicators to evaluate the level of student's involvement in Quality Assurance (QA) processes

INDICATORS	OPERATIONALIZATION	LIKERT-SCALE SCORING CRITERIA (1–5)
i1 Inclusion of the students in processes of AQ	Measures the formal and structural presence of student representatives within the university's Quality Assurance bodies and mechanisms.	1 = no participation; 2 = predominantly formal participation; 3 = active formal participation; 4 = systematic participation; 5 = systematic and structured participation across multiple QA levels.
i2 Active Student Participation in QA Processes	Assesses the extent of students' actual involvement in quality monitoring, evaluation, and review activities.	1 = no participation; 2 = predominantly formal participation; 3 = active formal participation; 4 = systematic participation; 5 = systematic and structured participation across multiple QA levels.
i3 Student Proactivity in QA Processes	Measures students' capacity to formulate proposals, observations, and proactive contributions to the improvement of teaching activities and student services.	1 = no participation; 2 = predominantly formal participation; 3 = active formal participation; 4 = systematic participation; 5 = systematic and structured participation across multiple QA levels.
i4 Institutional Responsiveness to Student Proposals	Assesses the extent to which student proposals are acknowledged, considered, and incorporated into institutional decision-making and quality enhancement processes.	1 = no participation; 2 = predominantly formal participation; 3 = active formal participation; 4 = systematic participation; 5 = systematic and structured participation across multiple QA levels.

Upon completion of the document analysis phase, the qualitative data extracted from the Periodic Accreditation Reports underwent a systematic coding process aimed at transforming them into continuous categorical variables. The interpretation of the evidence, its assignment to the identified ordinal categories, and its conversion into quantitative data were carried out directly by the researcher through the assignment of scores on a five-point Likert scale, according to the criteria defined above. Following the quantitative coding of the qualitative evidence emerging from the document analysis, the data were subjected to a non-parametric analysis of variance using the Kruskal-Wallis test, conducted with the support of the online software JsStat, in order to verify the possible existence of statistically significant differences between the groups defined by the legal status of the University.

Subsequently, to further investigate the location of the differences identified in the overall analysis, a post-hoc analysis was conducted using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction, in order to account for the error arising from multiple comparisons and to identify in which pairs of groups the differences were significant. This procedure, carried out using the open-source software Jamovi, allowed us to move from an overall assessment of heterogeneity among the groups to a detailed examination of the specific relationships between the different types of universities considered.

5. The Evaluation Report (Rapporti di Valutazione – RAP) by ANVUR

In line with the research design, the selection of the document sample was carried out by considering all RAPs published by ANVUR under the AVA 3 model, which were available and accessible on the ANVUR public website as of June 2026.

From this perspective, the unit of analysis is not the individual institutional case, but rather the different organizational configurations of the university system, treated as analytical categories for the purpose of comparison. It is important to note, however, the presence of potential sources of bias related to the nature of the analyzed material: firstly, the researcher's participation in certain evaluation processes conducted by the Evaluation Expert Committees (CEV), which could introduce a potential information asymmetry in the production of results, although this aspect is not the specific focus of this paper, nor is there any comparative interest aimed at evaluating individual institutions.

Second, we acknowledge the potential influence stemming from the researcher's participation in ANVUR evaluation procedures as a Student Expert—a factor which, while ensuring direct knowledge of the processes under analysis, requires an explicit reflective stance in order to minimize potential biases in interpretation.

Considering these premises, the analysis focuses exclusively on the evidence contained in the RAPs, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns and differences attributable to the various institutional types, without assigning any evaluative value to the individual universities under consideration.

6. Analysis of RAPs Using Generative Artificial Intelligence

The data collection was based on the RAP reports published by ANVUR as part of the AVA 3 system, with reference to the various types of universities considered according to their legal status rather than their specific institutional names. This methodological choice responds to the need to shift the focus from individual university cases to the structural characteristics of the institutions, with the aim of investigating any differences in the ways in which students are represented, involved, and valued among public, private, and online universities. From this perspective, the unit of analysis was defined by the type of university, taken as a comparative variable useful for identifying any discontinuities in the models for implementing quality assurance processes.

The data collection phase involved an initial extraction of relevant qualitative information from the selected documents, supported by the use of the generative artificial intelligence tool Notebook LM (Palladino, 2025), which was used exclusively to assist in the preliminary review, organization, and systematization of the textual material. The tool's contribution was limited to a supportive role and did not replace the researcher's interpretation; the researcher critically evaluated the emerging evidence, mapped it to the analytical categories defined during the design phase, and transformed it into observable variables.

Subsequently, the qualitative data were subjected to a quantitative coding process by the researcher, who assigned scores on a five-point Likert scale (1 to 5) based on interpretive criteria defined in advance. This process made it possible to translate the documentary content into comparable data while maintaining the connection to the semantic complexity of the original information.

6.1 The Importance of Teaching and Learning Centers in the Training of Faculty and Students

A recurring theme that emerged from the analysis of the RAPs concerns the role played by Teaching and Learning Centers (TLCs) in the processes of enhancing teaching quality and in promoting an institutional culture focused on continuous improvement. Although TLCs are not a standalone requirement within the AVA 3 system, their presence is frequently cited by the Evaluation Expert Committees (CEV) as a defining element of university policies related to requirement A for the institution, with reference to teaching innovation strategies, faculty training, and student involvement in processes to improve the educational offering.

An analysis of the RAPs reveals that several universities, both public and private, show positive results attributable to the activities of the TLCs. These centres are cited as strengths in some of the RAPs under review. Despite differing organizational models, they highlight how these centres contribute to the dissemination of innovative teaching and learning practices, the strengthening of faculty members' pedagogical skills, and the promotion of initiatives aimed at the student community. Particularly significant is the fact that, in the CEV's assessments, TLCs are frequently associated with universities' ability to develop a systemic vision of quality, moving beyond an exclusively procedural conception of Quality Assurance.

From this perspective, TLCs appear to function as organizational mechanisms (Felisatti, 2014; Perla, 2023) capable of fostering integration among faculty development, pedagogical innovation, and student engagement, thereby contributing to the creation of learning environments consistent with the principles of student-centered education promoted by the ESG and incorporated into the AVA system.

The emergence of this evidence within universities characterized by different legal and organizational structures suggests that the presence of structures dedicated to faculty development and the support of teaching and learning processes may represent an enabling factor for the dissemination of participatory practices and for the consolidation of a culture of quality that is more widely shared among faculty, students, and governing bodies.

6.2 Future Directions for AVA 4: Toward a Model of Structured Student Participation

The findings of the document analysis suggest the need to further develop quality assurance systems toward models that are more consistent with the principles of student-centered education promoted by the ESG and incorporated into the AVA 3 system. Although the current regulatory framework formally recognizes the role of students in QA processes, the results show that the degree of actual involvement continues to depend significantly on the organizational choices of individual universities and on the presence of structures and mechanisms capable of supporting participation. In this context, a possible evolution of the AVA model should include the introduction of requirements more focused on the quality of student participation, moving beyond an exclusively representative approach to promote forms of engagement based on the development of specific competencies regarding the quality of education and university governance. A first area for development concerns the role of Teaching and Learning Centers (TLCs). The analysis of the RAPs highlights how universities where these structures are more firmly established frequently exhibit innovative practices to support teaching and promote a culture of quality. From an evolutionary perspective, TLCs could be recognized as ideal settings for joint training between faculty and students, through workshops, communities of practice, and collaborative learning pathways dedicated to quality assurance processes. This approach would help strengthen dialogue among academic stakeholders and foster a shared vision of quality as a collective responsibility. A second area of innovation concerns the recognition of the skills developed by students involved in QA bodies.

One could consider introducing a transparency sheet for the skills of the student quality expert, aimed at documenting activities carried out, training courses attended, and learning outcomes acquired during their term. This mechanism would make visible skills that are often implicit today, such as data analysis, critical reading of institutional documents, evaluation of educational processes, organizational problem-solving, and participation in decision-making processes.

In line with the principles of recognizing formal, non-formal, and informal learning, the system

could also include specific certified training programs accompanied by a final assessment of competencies, with the possibility of awarding university credits (CFU) as part of the curriculum. Such a solution would help strengthen students' informed participation, fostering the development of professionals with advanced skills in university quality and governance. The integration of training, participation, and skills recognition could be a defining feature of the future evolution of the AVA system, facilitating the transition from primarily consultative participation to competent, responsible participation that is fully integrated into continuous quality improvement processes.

7. Interpretation of the results

The results show that the legal status of the university has a varying impact on the dimensions of student participation analysed. The differences are statistically significant for indicators related to the structural presence of students in quality assurance processes, their active involvement, and the consideration of their proposals, while the dimension of initiative shows a trend that is not statistically significant but is nonetheless interesting from an interpretive standpoint. This paints a picture in which student participation still appears to be heavily dependent on the institutional structures of universities, confirming the need for further consolidation of practices and mechanisms capable of ensuring participation that is not merely formal, but effective and substantive.

7.1 Legal Status of the University $\times$ i1

The non-parametric analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant difference among the different types of universities with respect to indicator i1, which measures the level of student inclusion in Quality Assurance processes ($H = 11.12$; $p = 0.004$). To identify the groups underlying this difference, a post hoc analysis was performed using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction (Table 2). The results indicate no statistically significant differences between state and non-state universities ($p = 1.000$), whereas statistically significant differences emerge in both the comparison between state and telematic universities ($p = 0.004$) and between non-state and telematic universities ($p = 0.038$). These findings suggest that the observed differences in student inclusion within QA structures and bodies are primarily driven by telematic universities, which exhibit lower levels compared to the other two institutional categories.

This evidence highlights that the formalisation of student participation is not evenly distributed across the Italian higher education system, revealing a clear distinction between traditional institutional models and telematic universities. This finding is particularly relevant in light of the literature, which identifies student representation as a strategic mechanism for quality enhancement and for fostering the development of academic citizenship competences.

Table 2. Dunn's test with correction of Bonferroni

		z	P(unadj)	P(Bonferroni)
GOVERNMENTAL	NON-GOVERNMENTAL	0.0343	.973	1.000
GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	3.2377	.001	.004
NON-GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	2.4977	.013	.038

7.2 Legal Status of the University $\times$ i2

Regarding indicator i2, which refers to students' effective involvement in quality monitoring, evaluation, and review activities, the Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference among the university types considered ($H = 10.21$; $p = 0.006$).

However, the post hoc analysis conducted using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction (Table 3) indicates that this difference is attributable exclusively to the comparison between state and

telematic universities ($p = 0.005$). No statistically significant differences emerge between state and non-state universities ($p = 0.558$), nor between non-state and telematic universities ($p = 0.548$).

These results suggest that students' active participation in QA processes is particularly well established in state universities compared with telematic universities, while non-state universities occupy an intermediate position that does not differ significantly from either group. This evidence confirms that the mere formal presence of students within QA bodies does not necessarily correspond to their effective involvement in quality monitoring and enhancement processes.

Table 3. Dunn's test with correction of Bonferroni

		z	P(unadj)	P(Bonferroni)
GOVERNMENTAL	NON-GOVERNMENTAL	1.32	.186	.558
GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	3.15	.002	.005
NON-GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	1.33	.183	.548

7.3 *Legal Status of the University x i3*

In contrast to what was observed for the previous indicators, indicator i3, which refers to students' ability to formulate proposals, observations, and proactive contributions to the improvement of teaching and service provision, does not show statistically significant differences across the university types considered. The Kruskal–Wallis test yields an H value of 5.41 with a corresponding significance level of $p = 0.067$.

The post hoc analysis confirms this result (Table 4), showing the absence of statistically significant differences in all pairwise comparisons: state and non-state universities ($p = 1.000$), state and telematic universities ($p = 0.065$), and non-state and telematic universities ($p = 0.964$). Although the comparison between state and telematic universities approaches the conventional threshold for statistical significance, it does not provide sufficient evidence to support the existence of statistically meaningful differences.

Overall, the results suggest that students' capacity to develop proposals and contribute proactively to improvement processes represents a relatively transversal dimension across the different institutional configurations. Consequently, the propensity for proactive participation appears to be less influenced by the legal status of the university than other dimensions of student participation examined in this study.

Table 4. Dunn's test with correction of Bonferroni

		z	P(unadj)	P(Bonferroni)
GOVERNMENTAL	NON-GOVERNMENTAL	0.941	.347	1.000
GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	2.295	.022	.065
NON-GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	0.992	.321	.964

7.4 *Legal Status of the University x i4*

Regarding indicator i4, designed to assess the extent to which student proposals are acknowledged and valorised within institutional decision-making and quality enhancement processes, the analysis reveals a statistically significant difference across university types ($H = 8.15$; $p = 0.017$). The post hoc analysis using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction (Figure 4) shows that this difference is attributable exclusively to the comparison between state and telematic universities ($p = 0.014$). No statistically significant differences emerge between state and non-state universities ($p = 0.846$), nor between non-state and telematic universities ($p = 0.586$).

These results indicate that universities' capacity to translate student input into concrete improvement actions varies according to their institutional configuration. State universities exhibit

higher levels of responsiveness to student proposals compared with telematic universities, suggesting a stronger integration of student participation within decision-making processes and Quality Assurance mechanisms.

Table 5. Dunn's test with correction of Bonferroni

		z	P(unadj)	P(Bonferroni)
GOVERNMENTAL	NON-GOVERNMENTAL	1.08	.282	.846
GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	2.83	.005	.014
NON-GOVERNMENTAL	ONLINE	1.30	.195	.586

8. Conclusion and future research directions

This study aimed to analyse the modalities through which the student body is involved in Quality Assurance processes within the Italian higher education system, using as units of analysis the Evaluation Reports (RAP) produced by the Evaluation Expert Committees (Commissioni di Esperti della Valutazione, CEV) within the AVA 3 framework. Through a mixed-methods approach, based on the combination of qualitative document analysis and the subsequent transformation of data into ordinal categories subjected to non-parametric statistical analysis, it was possible to investigate the relationship between the legal status of universities and the characteristics of student participation in QA processes.

The findings show that student participation is not uniformly distributed across the national university system. In particular, the analyses reveal statistically significant differences in indicators related to the structural inclusion of students in QA processes (i1), their active participation in monitoring and review activities (i2), and the ability of universities to incorporate and value student proposals (i4). Conversely, no statistically significant differences emerge with respect to student proactivity (i3), suggesting that the ability to formulate observations and improvement-oriented contributions is a widespread feature across different types of higher education institutions.

Particularly noteworthy are the post-hoc results, which identify online universities as the main source of differentiation compared with state universities and, to a lesser extent, non-state universities. The statistically significant differences mainly concern comparisons involving telematic universities, whereas state and non-state universities exhibit broadly comparable profiles across most indicators considered. This evidence suggests that the organisational nature of the institution may have a tangible impact on students' opportunities for participation and on the ways in which their presence is integrated into quality governance processes.

The results also allow for a broader reflection on the Italian Quality Assurance model. Although the current regulatory framework and the AVA system formally assign a central role to student participation (Campanella, 2025, pp. 3–5), the evidence collected shows that the concrete implementation of this principle remains strongly dependent on the organisational choices of individual universities. In other words, the student-centred paradigm promoted by European and national policies appears to be implemented in differentiated ways, resulting in uneven levels of student inclusion and engagement.

In light of these findings, it appears appropriate to initiate a reflection on the evolution of future accreditation models, starting from the AVA 4 framework. In particular, there is a need to strengthen the alignment of the Italian system with the principles defined by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and with the recommendations promoted by ENQA, which recognise students as active partners in governance, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement processes. From this perspective, student participation should be regarded as a structural requirement of the QA system, regardless of the legal status of the institution, moving beyond approaches that delegate its implementation solely to local organisational choices.

The findings also support a potential evolution of the AVA model oriented not only towards assessing how universities involve students, but also towards directly evaluating the contribution of student representation within Quality Assurance processes. The introduction of dedicated, independent hearing sessions at both central and peripheral levels, together with the inclusion of specific indicators related to the quality of student participation, could contribute to strengthening the role of students as autonomous institutional stakeholders within accreditation processes.

In this regard, the proposals advanced in this study also concern the strengthening of Teaching and Learning Centres as spaces for joint training of academic staff and students with expertise in QA, as well as the introduction of mechanisms for the formal recognition of competences acquired through student representation, such as competence transparency records and forms of curricular recognition. Such interventions could contribute to consolidating a genuinely participatory quality culture, in which student involvement is not merely a procedural requirement but an active and generative component of institutional improvement processes.

Despite the limitations related to sample size and the exploratory nature of the study, the contribution provides useful evidence for understanding the dynamics characterising student involvement in Italian QA systems and opens new research avenues aimed at further investigating the relationship between university organisational models, student participation, and the quality of academic governance processes.

A further point of reflection concerns the regulatory framework governing student participation within the Italian higher education system. The findings indicate that the observed differences primarily concern online universities and, more generally, institutions characterised by organisational models that differ from traditional universities. This evidence suggests the need to promote greater harmonisation of regulations governing student representation, to ensure homogeneous minimum levels of participation regardless of institutional legal status. From this perspective, student representation should be recognised as a structural and essential component of Quality Assurance systems, with comparable rights, functions, participation spaces, and training pathways across state, non-state, online, and special-status universities. Such an approach would enhance the coherence of the national system with the principles promoted by the ESG and ENQA, contributing to the development of a more uniform and genuinely student-centred governance model.

With regard to future research developments, it would be advisable to extend the analysis to a larger set of Periodic Accreditation Reports and to adopt double-blind independent coding procedures. In particular, the transformation of qualitative evidence into ordinal categories could be assigned to multiple independent coders, enabling the subsequent calculation of inter-rater agreement indices and increasing the reliability of the interpretative process. Such a design would further reduce subjectivity in the scoring phase and strengthen the methodological robustness of the proposed analytical model. In parallel, future studies could complement document analysis with interviews or focus groups involving student representatives, Quality Assurance Presidiums, and governance bodies, to further explore the dynamics that shape student participation in Quality Assurance processes.

Acknowledgement

This paper is the result of the authors' collaborative work and reflects their joint thinking. However, Simone Campanella is responsible for sections 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4; Lucia Mentore is responsible for sections 6.1 and 8; Luca Refrigeri is responsible for sections 1 and 6.2. All authors contributed to the final drafting and revision of the work.

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