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Quality in context – embedding improvement

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Short bio: Thomas Bach is an experienced student representative in the HEA QA field from Germany. He has been engaged in QA tasks since 2009, this includes activities at his previous University of Applied Science Kaiserslautern / Zweibrücken and at the national level. He has participated as a peer in several reviews on programme and institutional level inside and outside Europe (with a focus on Germany) and contributed to meetings and developments in HEA QA.

Furthermore, he is a member of the QA pools from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and ESU. This ongoing participation lead to memberships of several accreditation committees and QA bodies in accreditation agencies and universities, four years involvement in the executive committee of the German QA pool, and instructor and contributor for several trainings.

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Short bio: In 2013 and 2014 Melanie Gut was a delegate of the ETH for the Swiss Students' Union. Since 2015 she is a member of the executive committee of the Swiss Students' Union (VSS|UNES|USU), as which she represents Swiss students in all national bodies related to quality assurance and coordinates the work between the agency AAQ and the students. One of the main topics she is involved with is the enhancement of the representation of students in the processes of accreditation and quality assurance.

Moreover, Melanie Gut is responsible for the planning and realization of all trainings for student experts of the Swiss accreditation pool. During the last year, she was active as a member in the European Students' Union accreditation pool and recently was elected to be the international student member of the AQ Austria board.

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Short bio: Silke Kern is responsible for Quality Assurance in the office for academic affairs in the Austrian Students' Union (ÖH). She started her activity as a student representative at the local Student Union at FH Joanneum, university of applied sciences. There she was studying to get her Bachelor in Construction Design and Economics. During her Bachelor programme, she jumped at the chance to do an exchange semester in Halmstad, Sweden in 2013. Since 2014, she is enrolled in the master programme in Civil Engineering and Structural Engineering at Graz University of Technology. During the last years, she was able to participate in several trainings in QA. Furthermore, she participated in several programme and institutional reviews. Since July 2016, she is also member of the ESU QA pool.

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Short bio: Katharina Mahrt is a member of the executive committee of the German Student Accreditation Pool. She is a law student at the university of Kiel and former chairperson of the national union of students in Germany (fzs) as well as a former member of the executive board of the umbrella organisation of student services organisations (DSW). As a member of the German Student Accreditation Pool she participated as a peer in several programme and system-accreditations since 2014.

Proposal

Title: Collaboration between student QA pools– Embedding improvement and enhancing quality of student QA pools in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Abstract:

Countries across Europe shared similarities in quality assurance in the higher education area even before the ESG. This paper explores these similarities in different contexts from a student perspective and analyses how QA policies and practices are adapted to respect diversity and remain fit for purpose. We will present the collaboration of student experts' pools in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. While we share a common language, our experiences and expectations differ considerably. This paper shows how better trainings and regular exchanges of experience within the DACH collaboration increased awareness of student participation in QA procedures. We present an example that illustrates the improved cooperation between agencies and the three student experts' pools. We also analysed the challenges that need to be addressed by the still young DACH collaboration, namely limited resources, transfer of know-how and the development of tools for international QA trainings. (142/150 Wörter)

The paper is based on: ~~research~~ / ~~policy~~ / **practice**

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper:

1 Introduction

Student QA expert pools are a common way to organize student participation in external QA in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): "In 21 countries there are specific qa experts' pools where students are included" [11]. The student expert pools of Austria, Germany and Switzerland ("DACH collaboration") are united by the goal to ensure a quality based student involvement in quality assurance processes in higher education. All three pools train and nominate student experts for quality assurance reviews conducted by QA Agencies in the EHEA. As the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, [12]) clearly state that student participation is a valuable resource for ensuring quality in Higher Education and therefore made student participation obligatory for external QA procedures, the three student experts pools set great emphasis on training and selecting students for QA reviews. For more details on the internal processes of the pools organization, see [2, 4].

The DACH collaboration is an example for student experts' pools in Europe of how to enhance their abilities and impact. Although the pools are differently structured, sized and in particular organized, a collaboration has developed since 2012. The first part of this paper gives a brief overview of the three pools. The second part analyses a case example of the successful collaboration, a joint nomination process for QA reviews. The third part shows the success factors and challenges of the DACH cooperation and describes how the DACH collaboration will face future challenges like joint appearance and recruitment of active students. Finally, we analyse problems and chances of the cooperation procedures between agencies and student pools.

1.1 Development of the DACH collaboration

The development of DACH collaboration among student pools started only in 2012. When QA became an increasingly important element of the Bologna process, national student unions discussed their involvement in national QA policies [10] and especially how to ensure involvement of students in expert panels. Depending on national policies, student unions implemented QA involvement at a national level in different ways and within different time frames. For example, the German pool was established in 2000, while the Austrian pool was only established in 2013 with the help of the two other pools [2, 4].

Since 2012, the collaboration has gained impact and developed into a well-structured discussion and exchange platform which is extremely valuable for all members of the DACH collaboration. The first contact and exchange of expertise between the German and the Swiss pool took place in 2011. The representatives of the Swiss and the German student experts' pool met each other at a European Students' Union (ESU) event in Edinburgh [1]. The two pools had many similar problems that could be solved by closer and more frequent contact. The following year, the Austrian students' pool representatives joined this exchange [2] and the three pools established the so called DACH collaboration. To keep in contact, the pools' representatives planned three meetings per year and the three pools set up a joint mailing list. With this, they created the foundation for a good collaboration.

1.2 Pool organisation

Even though the pools are diversely organised and of different sizes, they all face similar challenges, namely the establishment of cooperation with agencies, nomination policies as response to the agencies' requests for student experts, amplification of the students' voice to become a full member in all parts of quality assurance [3, 4, 5, 6].

The following table shows the pools' structures.

Indicator	Switzerland	Austria	Germany
Funding	AAQ	National students´ union	German agencies (basic funding) and student unions (voluntary donations)
Organisation	Affiliated to the Swiss Students' Union	Affiliated to the Austrian Students' Union	Free cooperation
Cooperation with Agencies	With national agency and some others	With national agency and some others	With national agencies (10) and universities (>30)
Number of active members	~60	~80	~300
Number of QA reviews in 2015	~15	~50	~500
Type of QA reviews in the respective country	Institutional accreditation, programme accreditation	Institutional accreditation, programme accreditation,	System accreditation, programme accreditation, evaluations, certifications

		institutional audit of QM systems	
Number of trainings per year	2	2-3	1-2 (system accreditation) 4-8 (programme accreditation)
Foundation of the pool	2007	2013	2000
Number of higher Education institutions in the country	~40	~70	~450

Tab. 1. Comparative Analysis of DACH Students QA pool structures

2 Effects of internationalisation and commodification of QA on student experts

In all DACH countries, as well as other European countries, a trend towards internationalisation and commodification of quality assurance can be observed. Quality assurance has become a liberal market, where agencies compete with each other. One example of this development is the implementation of the demand of the ministerial conference in Yerevan [13] to grant access for EQAR registered agencies to all EHEA countries. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland this demand has already been widely implemented.

Internationalisation and commodification result in international student experts evaluating programmes and higher education institutions (HEIs) for international agencies without any experience within the national HEI system. This affects students more than other stakeholders: as programmes, curricula and learning environment change quickly, the study experience of an actual or recent student is difficult to replace in an expert panel. Thus, internationalisation and competition among agencies in liberal QA markets leads to a lack of experience of the current local situation in QA reviews within expert panels, competition among student experts and difficulties for QA agencies in selecting student experts.

International QA reviews were the main driving force for the creation of the DACH collaboration and also one of the biggest challenges. QA agencies planning an international QA review sent random requests that lacked information. An example: Agency of country X requests a student expert of country Y at the students' pool in country Z. These procedures often led to confusion and inefficient processes within the three pools. The goal was to solve this problem and find an efficient process which fits all three pools and the cooperating agencies.

The nominated students should know the field of a review, be familiar with the laws and national circumstances and have expertise concerning QA procedures in general. All three pools agreed that the nomination of a student of the country of the review is a good way to fulfil these criteria. Moreover, students are closer to the fast changing study and learning environment. For these reasons a common nomination process was developed.

3 Common Process of international nomination

Agencies sending requests to all three pools led to confusion among student experts and pool coordinators as well as the following negative results:

For QA pools:

- It is frustrating for students to be nominated although they are not considered because other pools nominated as well and were preferred
- It is not possible to adhere to the different diversity criteria of each pool if agencies select the student experts by their own unknown criteria.
- Additional work was created without any gain

For Agencies:

- Conflicts with national pools
- Students do not apply anymore, as they are unsatisfied with the process - this results in a lack of applications

The DACH collaboration decided to investigate these issues and to create more transparency for agencies, student experts and all other stakeholders about the QA reviews in the three countries. The pool coordinators created an internal list with requirements for the nomination process of each pool. The collaborating pools developed a common process of nomination to coordinate the agencies' requests. Each pool discussed the issues with the agencies in their country to raise awareness of the problems and to work together to improve the situation.

3.1 Internal aspects of the common nomination process

The idea of the nomination process is to complement but not compete with the other pools. Fig. 1. shows our internal process of international nomination. The pool representatives noticed that for successful student participation it is necessary that the student experts are either well trained or experienced. The pool representatives agreed that the best choice for the students to show their knowledge of the national system and gain expertise is to participate in QA reviews in their country. Consequently, the agencies should always contact the respective pool of the country of the QA review.
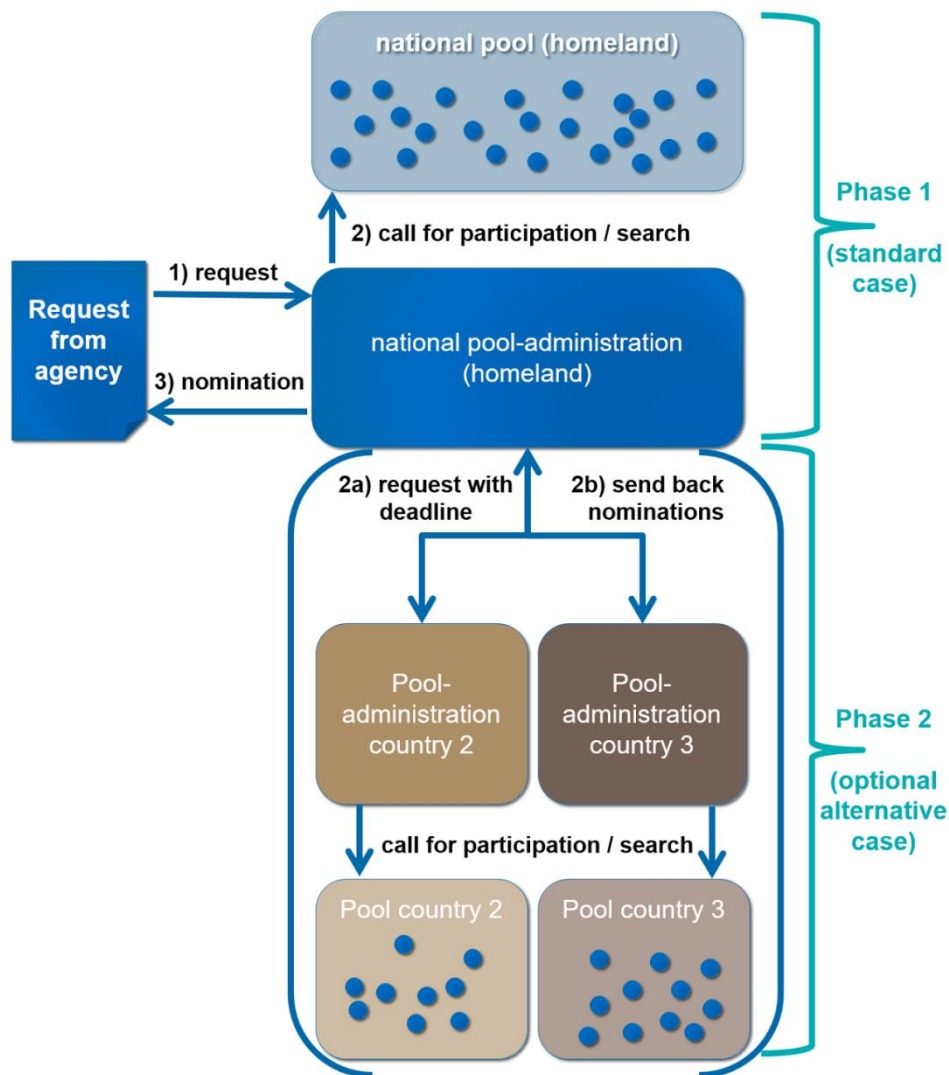
Fig.1: Process of the international nomination.

3.2 External aspects of the nomination process- creation of a joint form

A huge problem was the procedure of requests for student experts from agencies. The agencies sent informal e-mails to the pool coordinators and these mails were often lacking relevant information. The first pool administrators who used a form to solve this problem were those of the Swiss pool. The Austrian pool copied the idea of the form shortly thereafter, and the communication between the pools and the agencies improved as a result thereof (based on feedback from agency employees and pool coordinators).

The pool coordinators designed a form to put the common nomination process into practice and avoid confusion. This joint form contains information about the collaboration of the

three pools and all relevant contact details. The difficulty in creating the form was to satisfy the needs of all involved stakeholders. The agencies must provide the following information:

- The chosen pool
- Contact details of the requesting agency
- Details about the peer review (e.g. study programme, higher education institution)
- The requirements for the student expert (e.g. field of study)

This form is regularly improved based on the agencies feedback.

4 Further success factors of the collaboration

4.1 Working with agencies and HEI

We see several opportunities for further enhancements:

- Agencies and HEI should work together with the QA pools and should avoid working with untrained students. All three QA pools ensure that students are trained and informed about QA in the HEA. The often practised procedure of a 30 min training session before a QA review is not suitable to bring a new student to the level of an expert peer and does not satisfy the criterion of "appropriate training" from ESG 2.4 [12].
- Experienced QA agency employees could participate in student sessions like trainings and panels. This would provide useful information to new students as well as foster the mutual understanding of the work of both sides. HEI could organize meetings and trainings to increase knowledge and understanding about internal QA.
- All stakeholders should always keep in mind the special situation of students. Students are not full time employees who have 40 h per week available to them for QA tasks and work. Sometimes they may need support, sometimes they can't meet all deadlines.
- Agencies and HEI should provide clear standards and guidelines for peer selection and publish them. It could be worthwhile to create a common pool or database on a national or european level for peers. There should be standards for international audits on how to compose the peer group. At the moment it is unclear if the student should be from the target country or on the contrary explicitly not from the target country.
- Integrating student organisations into QA projects could enable advancements which are fruitful for all partners. With international cooperations like our DACH collaboration, this would be possible on an international level.

4.2 Working together in quality assurance of trainings

The DACH collaboration has established a close cooperation in the development of quality assurance and the improvement of the student experts' pool trainings. All three pools organise trainings to teach their members about national and international quality assurance systems and to exchange experiences and good practices. In order to ameliorate the content of these trainings, the pool representatives visit the trainings of the other QA pools frequently and discuss the topics covered and techniques used. They exploited synergies by creating documents and materials and keeping them up-to-date. This exchange provides a self-organised quality assurance of the student experts' trainings

and consequently improves the student experts' skills. This is a very important tool to enhance the students' voice in the panel of experts and to improve the quality of the QA reviews themselves.

4.3 International exchange of experience

The members of the DACH collaboration aim to meet three times a year. The experience shows that the best way to organise regular meetings is to combine them with regular student experts' trainings. This allows meeting with a larger audience, reduces costs and provides a setting for knowledge sharing.

4.4 Learning from experiences

An important topic on which the pools exchange experience is the pool development and the challenges that they face due to it. To give a few concrete examples:
- As the oldest pool, the German pool provided support and information during the establishment phase of the other pools
- From 2014 to 2016, the Austrian pool underwent enormous growth, and the pool's internal procedures were no longer practical. The German pool representatives, having already experienced this phase, could share their experience and give advice.
- The Austrian and German pools could advise the Swiss pool concerning the newly changed law [8], according to which all EQAR registered agencies are allowed to apply for recognition to conduct institutional accreditation reviews.
- Adoption of the new ESG [12].

5 Challenges encountered and possible failures

During the development of the DACH collaboration, the pools encountered many expected and unexpected challenges.

5.1 Reservations and doubts

A major challenge for the partnership were the differences of the three pools. While the different embeddings in the respective parent organisation was no big issue, the challenge was to implement a system that considers the different sizes. First attempts of working together very nearly failed because of distrust. German pool members feared that students from Switzerland and Austria would flood German QA reviews and the two smaller pools had the same concerns vice versa. Only when agencies started to ask different pools to nominate students, the pool representatives engaged in finding a sustainable solution and to create more transparency. In the end, the common goal of increasing student participation helped to overcome the differences and to face these challenges together.

5.2 Limited resources and saving costs

Another problem was (and still are) the limited resources and the difficulties in promoting information about QA trainings, which led to a lack of students in certain fields of study. The joint nomination structure now offers the possibility to resort to a bigger pool of students without entailing further costs for additional trainings.

6 Future challenges and possibilities

While the collaboration is built on a solid foundation due to the increased exchange between the three pools over the past years, there are still some aspects that may lead to challenges in the future. Of these, the most important are keeping the communication open and dealing with the constant change of persons in charge and the therefore inevitable loss of knowledge and experience.

6.1 Students' involvement in voluntary activities

Studies in Germany show that there is a decreasing number of students who are involved in volunteer organisations, due to a lack of time or interest to be committed to a defined cause for a longer period of time [9]. This decreases the number of students who voluntarily spend their time with QA.

As fewer people are involved in voluntary activities, fewer people share the responsibilities for managing the pools, which leads to an increased lack of time for those and to less creative activities, fewer new ideas, etc. A possible solution could be to transform the volunteer organisation into a professional organisation, which would however still face the problem of the student life cycle.

6.2 Communication and knowledge transfer

As there is a frequent change in persons at the executive level, the challenge for successful collaboration lies in the transfer of knowledge and experience. With every person who leaves the collaboration, valuable experience concerning the cooperation process is lost. For effective communication, it is thus necessary for the three pools to meet at least twice a year in person to get to know the persons in charge of the other pools. Implementing more defined processes or using a shared database could improve these problems. In addition to these regular meetings, the fact that all pools have different legislation periods prevents a large loss of knowledge and know-how between new and former coordinators.

6.3 Tools for international QA

In the three German-speaking countries the ESG are applied. However, there are differences in the national frameworks of the respective higher education landscapes. The three pools are now planning to create tools to prepare students who are participating in QA reviews in multiple German-speaking countries. This challenge might be addressed with an international training or a handout that explains the characteristics of the higher education systems of each country.

7 Conclusion

We have shown and analysed how the three pools created a good working cooperation with a formal structure and several meetings per year. Since 2012, a complex network was developed, in which the three pools exchange their knowledge regularly. Discussions with different pool representatives about upcoming problems in the rapidly developing field of quality assurance leads to the development of better and more sustainable solutions, because the process is more diverse and interactive. Moreover, through the collaboration and mutual control the pools internally assure the quality of their trainings. As a case example of the collaboration, we have shown the successful implementation of

a common nomination process, which improved the communication with agencies as well as the quality of the nominations on an international level.

To conclude, sharing knowledge and working together is important, especially in times of growing competition and commodification of education. This is not only the case in the German-speaking region but all other regions of Europe as well. We are aware that the structure of each pool in Europe is quite different, but it is not impossible to work together and to formalise joint processes. We hope the cooperation and knowledge exchange within all students' unions in Europe can be enhanced in the future, which can have a high impact on the role and status of students, not only in the process of external QA but also within the higher education system itself and in each institution.

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Discussion questions:

- What do agencies think about the general process of common nomination processes between student pools?
- What processes could be further enhanced within the collaboration in the point of view of the agencies.
- Should QA procedures include local students or also foreign students?
- What are the practices/policies of agencies for the request and election of student experts for international reviews?
- Is there any other kind of collaboration between student expert pools?
- Are such collaborations possible in other parts of Europe or even whole Europe? Is the language a problem? What points should they handle first if they want to do this?