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Broadening the Scope of QA

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Call for contributions: paper submission form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Acting as project manager, Kevin Gønge is responsible for both institutional and programme accreditations, and he is in charge of developing the Danish Accreditation Institution's accreditation indicators and database analyses. Furthermore, Kevin Gønge coordinates student involvement work. He is a facilitator in the STAR network and has provided input for sharing experiences among the Nordic countries on student involvement in EQA processes. Kevin Gønge has previously been employed by the Danish Evaluation Institute, for whom he has performed analyses in the HE area.

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As an accreditation consultant, Sofie Bjerg Kirketerp is responsible for and has carried out a large number of higher education and institutional accreditations of HEs in Denmark. Sofie Bjerg Kirketerp has contributed to the ongoing development of the methods applied by the Danish Accreditation Institution. Furthermore, over the past three years, Sofie Bjerg Kirketerp has dedicated her efforts to coordinating student involvement in accreditation, e.g. as a facilitator in the STAR network and by giving talks to students and HEIs about student involvement. Sofie Bjerg Kirketerp has previously worked with IQA at Copenhagen Business School and the University of Copenhagen.



Proposal

Title: Five-Star Student Involvement

Abstract (150 words max):

It is generally accepted in Europe that students should be involved in the EQA of HEs. Requirements for involving students are stated in the ESGs, but student involvement in a meaningful manner is easier said than done. In many countries, including Denmark, the solution has been to include student representatives on various councils and panels. However, five years ago, the Danish Accreditation Institution (AI) outlined a vision for a more long-term, dynamic relationship with students to enhance student involvement throughout our EQA activities. This vision gave birth to STAR, the Students' Accreditation Council, a network for Danish student organisations facilitated by AI. The network provides a forum for dialogue with students about developing and ensuring the quality of education from a student perspective. Based on our positive experience of student involvement in EQA activities, AI invites participants to discuss opportunities and challenges in working with student involvement as a QAA.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max): 2965

This paper is case-based. Based on examples from practice, the paper presents how QAAs can establish and increase student involvement. We believe that by sharing our experience of student involvement in Denmark, we can contribute valuable input to the discussion of how to broaden the scope of QA, as well as inspire other QAAs to successfully implement similar initiatives.

Five-Star Student Involvement

Since its launch in 2007, AI has focussed on building and maintaining good relations and dialogue with Danish educational institutions and important labour market stakeholders. However, like many of our European sister organisations, AI has had to realise that establishing systematic, dialogue-based collaboration with, and involvement of, students in the development and implementation of EQA activities is challenging. Many QAAs meet the expectations for student involvement by including students formally as representatives on expert panels and in connection with interviews during site visits. This is also the case in Denmark. However, at AI we want to raise the bar and take student involvement to the next level by supplementing the traditional and more formal perceptions of student involvement with the vision of students as co-creators in a mutually beneficial QA process. It was clear early on that to achieve this vision, we needed to breathe new life into our relationship and

dialogue with the students. In 2014, the STAR network was born with the objective to help us establish closer and more systematic collaboration with student bodies.

A star is born

STAR is an acronym for *Studerendes Akkrediteringsråd* – which translates into English as the Students' Accreditation Council. The STAR network is for student organisations at universities and art institutions, as well as at professional, vocational and maritime institutions (levels 5–7 in the European qualifications framework). 16 active student organisations are currently represented in STAR. The members meet twice annually. The meetings take place at, and are facilitated by, AI. The topics of the meetings are chosen on the basis of proposals from STAR members and on the basis of current AI and educational policy topics.

The concept of STAR is based primarily on the principle that students should be taken seriously and have direct influence on the quality assurance of their education.

STAR meetings are therefore used to address current topics on the quality of education, as well as identify specific areas for collaboration that are of interest to students and that can moreover contribute to developing and supporting AI's workflows relating to accreditation and analysis. STAR therefore reaches beyond the standardised understanding of student involvement and creates a formal framework for an equal partnership.

Strong student involvement is not established overnight. As a prelude to establishing STAR, AI invited all national student organisations to a dialogue meeting to gauge their expectations and discuss the possibilities of a collaborative partnership. There was general support for the

Student organisations in Denmark

- HEIs in Denmark are divided by type of institution: academies of professional higher education offer programmes at levels 5 and 6; university colleges offer programmes at level 6; and universities offer programmes at levels 6 and 7.
- Local student councils take part through representatives in larger **national umbrella organisations** for the specific programme levels. This organisational set-up is particularly common in the university area, in which the National Union of Danish Students, for example, represents all university students.
- Students can be organised according to their **study area**, typically in affiliation with a national labour union (as is the case for nurses, preschool teachers and schoolteachers for example). The smallest professional student organisation represent around 300 students at national level.
- Some students are involved in student politics in the context of a **political party**. STAR, however, does not represent the interests of any political party.

Students enrolled in short-cycle higher education programmes at the business academies are generally not organised. This group of students is therefore not represented in STAR.



establishment of STAR, and the students expressed many good ideas for how STAR could be developed as a student accreditation body and which areas such a body should focus on in dealing with education quality and accreditation. The collaborative partnership has since evolved over the course of nine formal meetings and through collaboration in a large number of specific analyses and projects.

STAR initiatives

In the following we will describe some of the initiatives that have come to fruition under AI's collaboration with STAR.

How to get difficult issues on the agenda

Together with the STAR Network, AI has launched a number of initiatives to strengthen collaboration between educational institutions and their student bodies in connection with institutional accreditation. STAR clearly helps AI bring items to the agenda that it would otherwise be difficult to encourage educational institutions to address. In this sense, a network like STAR can be seen as a strategic tool for QAAs because educational institutions will be reluctant to ignore criticisms or calls for influence when these come from students across subject fields and educational sectors. By allying with students and using STAR as a lever, AI can put sensitive items on the agenda and launch initiatives and projects at and with educational institutions that would otherwise not be open to this. The following case exemplifies this.

A core interest for STAR is to ensure and develop the role of students in accreditation. A recurrent topic at STAR meetings has been how educational institutions select and prepare students for interviews with accreditation panels in connection with institutional accreditation. The members in STAR had spoken with students at accredited institutions, and experience from these interviews raised concerns as to whether the accredited institutions select students who are positive about the quality of their programmes but who do not necessarily represent the general sentiment of all students at the institution. Another concern was that the institutions instructed the students prior to the interview about which topics and perspectives to emphasise during the interview, and, more importantly, which topics or concrete cases to refrain from talking about.

On the basis of this, STAR took the initiative to set up a working group with representatives from all relevant stakeholder groups to discuss challenges and find a common solution. The working group included representatives from HEI interest groups: Universities Denmark, Danish Business Academies and University Colleges Denmark. Furthermore, the working group included five representatives from STAR as well as three representatives from AI, who also served as facilitators of the working group. The working group was tasked with discussing how students can actively participate in the accreditation process to a greater extent as well as how everyone can work together to ensure that students have a voice in these processes.



The working group completed its work successfully and everyone involved contributed actively to the outcome in the form of ten ambitions for student involvement in accreditation. Amongst other things, these ambitions focus on how, in collaboration with the students, the educational institutions and AI can best select, recruit and prepare students for the accreditation process and, more specifically, for the interviews that will be the accreditation panels' source of knowledge about students' perception and experience of QA work at their institution. The ambitions are primarily aimed at AI and at student organisations and the quality departments of educational institutions. The ambitions constitute a central part of AI's preparation of both the educational institutions and students prior to the accreditation process.

This is the first time that activities have been carried out in Denmark in which all key stakeholders in QA in HE have met and agreed on the framework for student involvement in accreditation. It is unlikely that AI would have been able to put this item on the agenda on its own, because the institutions themselves did not see an immediate need to discuss student involvement. It was a turning point when STAR directly addressed the issues and stood as the sender of the invitation to the working group.

“Give them something for free” – an invitation to talks on quality in education

Another example of how STAR has contributed with innovative ideas for new AI activities is mobile coffee vans. Coffee vans serve as catalysts for engaging in talks with students about education quality.

AI used to have only limited access to student organisations and to non-organised students at the institutions we accredit. STAR was therefore established with the ambition that AI not only strengthens the collaboration with student organisations but also to a greater extent enters into dialogue with students who are not organised in a student organisation or otherwise involved in student politics. This has been a continuous challenge for AI and one that we discussed with the members of STAR. Their answer was brief and prompt: “Give them something for free!” In continuation of this, STAR helped develop new concepts for student involvement so that AI can reach and engage students whom it has been difficult for us to reach so far. One result of this is the mobile three-wheeled coffee van, which visits all educational institutions on the verge of an institutional accreditation. In recent years, students at around 20 different institutions have been visited by a coffee van and AI representatives who invited them for coffee and a talk about what accreditation is and how as a student you can influence the process. We sponsored free coffee for more than 7,000 students and had a talk with each one of them about education quality and accreditation. The concept allowed us to talk with many students who would otherwise not have known that their institution was about to be accredited and that they could play an important role in this process. The concept turned out to be so successful that other institutions about to go through accreditation are asking when they can expect us to come by with our coffee van.



Students at the University of Copenhagen are offered a cup of coffee and a talk about quality in education.

The events are planned and conducted collaboratively between students from the relevant institution, the institution's quality department and AI.

STAR raises the quality of AI's core task

STAR contributes continuously to developing the different process steps in our accreditation concept. We will elaborate on this below through a number of brief examples.

One of the key outcomes of AI's collaboration with STAR is that it helps qualify and develop our core task: accreditation. Over the years, STAR has contributed several valuable ideas that have strengthened the students' voice in the accreditation process. These include having students show members of accreditation panels around when they come to visit the institutions, which allows the students to show the panel members around in, and talk about, their physical study environment. Furthermore, it gives accreditation panel members a more realistic insight into student life on campus than merely being presented with the management's latest prestige projects, for example.

STAR also contributes to identifying possible student representatives for our expert panels. STAR members appoint

In addition to STAR, students in Denmark are involved in the accreditation process in the following ways:

- There is a student representative on the **expert panel** that assesses the individual programme or educational institution.
- The expert panel's visits to programmes and institutions always include one or more **interviews** with students to verify and qualify the information received from management, lectures, etc.
- The Minister for Education and Research appoints two student representatives to sit on the **Accreditation Council**, which is the body in charge of making the final decision on accreditation.

student candidates with relevant profiles from their organisation. The fact that STAR takes part in identifying possible experts further helps ensure that students have broad influence in the accreditation process. Furthermore, this has been a great help to AI, particularly with respect to establishing expert panels for smaller educational institutions such as maritime and art institutions, as these institutions have a much smaller number of students, about whom AI has relatively limited knowledge.

AI is preparing to develop Version 2.0 of its accreditation concept and the students are important stakeholders in this connection. STAR will be contributing directly to the development of the new concept, amongst other things through a planned seminar in autumn, when STAR and student representatives from expert panels and the Accreditation Council, for example, will discuss input to an overall framework for the new concept and, more specifically, how student-centred learning can be included in the institutional accreditation concept.

Targeted communication to students

Communicating an accreditation process in a way that is both interesting and informative is difficult. STAR, however, is an opportunity to collaborate *with students* on how to target our communication *at students*. STAR has therefore played a key role in terms of adapting both the content and form of our student-targeted communication. This applies to everything from the structure and content of our website to the wording of the information letters that we send out to students who have been selected for interviews in connection with the accreditation of an institution. Amongst other things, STAR has contributed to the development of short films and animated films which – in a self-ironic tone adapted to young people– explain what accreditation is and what it is like to be a student representative during the various steps of the process. In addition, STAR has helped AI become more accessible and visible by using social media, and AI is now active on Twitter and Facebook.

It is not easy to engage ordinary students. However, thanks to STAR, we are now on the right track and we have become much better at meeting the students on their own turf.





Student involvement is no piece of cake: obstacles on the way to rewarding collaboration

Although our collaboration with STAR has generally been rewarding and successful, the process has not been without obstacles.

If you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk

The collaborative partnership between AI and STAR requires commitment. STAR must have genuine influence on the decision-making if the relationship between AI and STAR is to continue to be valuable. STAR members must feel that they are heard and that their ideas and comments create real change. Finding common ground can be difficult and major concessions often have to be made to accommodate the requests and ideas of STAR members. A former STAR member, who was part of STAR in its upstart phase, provided feedback on the work in STAR; feedback that has been decisive for AI's further ambitions for STAR. As chairman of one of the larger student organisations, he was often invited to take part in debates and events dealing with education. However, he had never seen a student-centred forum like STAR; a forum that did not merely involve students formally but actually listened to students and made real changes based on student input.

Productive disagreement

On the other side, STAR members do not always agree with AI's categories and minimum standards for what constitutes good quality in education. Nor do they always agree with our methods for how to analyse and measure this quality. This has resulted in a number of exciting and fruitful discussions that have contributed to identifying blind spots in our accreditation concept. These disagreements have also prompted discussions of a more ideological nature beyond the actual scope of AI, for example discussions about the concept of formative development/education and the purpose of education as such. It is important to allow room for such discussions.

Furthermore, STAR does not necessarily speak with one voice. Each member has his or her favourite cause and topic within accreditation and education quality depending on the sector he or she represents and the main organisation he/she comes from.

Ongoing replacement

Students inevitably come and go in student politics. This means that there is an ongoing replacement of STAR members, who usually hold their post in the student organisation for limited periods of one or two years. The high turnover rate can be challenging in terms of continuity and it can slow the work.

Furthermore, the professionalism of the individual student organisation differs. Some organisations have clear procedures for how to pass on information and knowledge to new members and have a clear agenda for their political work. Therefore, some organisations may have a stronger position in the network than others.



Furthermore, members may have lopsided levels of accreditation information: some may have been active in the accreditation of their own institution or they may have served as a student representative on an accreditation panel, while others have no practical experience of accreditation.

These differences impose great demands on the facilitation of meetings and activities in STAR, and AI is working continuously to prepare the STAR members in the best possible way prior to meetings and to introduce new members to both STAR and the accreditation concept through brief introduction meetings, for example.

Conclusion

Student involvement in EQA processes can be a difficult task and there is no easy fix. The establishment of the STAR network has provided AI with a means for engaging in systematic dialogue with student organisations, which has brought about positive initiatives. Amongst other things, STAR has helped develop procedures and concepts for quality assurance, and STAR has upgraded our student-targeted communication as well as moved us closer to ordinary students at the educational institutions. STAR also provides us with new possibilities to talk with the educational institutions about quality assurance from a student perspective and, as a result, launch new initiatives which it would have been difficult to convince the institutions to support if we had not had the students on our side.

In summary, at AI we have gained valuable experience about student involvement in EQA processes. The benefits and obstacles provided by our collaboration partnership with STAR may serve as inspiration for other QAAs and student organisations at EQAF 2018.

References: none.

Discussion questions:

1. Can utilisation of EQA be promoted through new ways of student involvement?

EQA is often perceived of as an exclusive party for HEIs and QAAs. This is due not least to the fact that EQA processes can seem very technical and the jargon used can seem inaccessible to anyone who does not work with QA on a daily basis. However, EQA creates a unique opportunity for students to gain real influence on QA work both during and after the EQA process. Can we – by applying new ways of collaborating – empower students to understand and apply our EQA work to a greater extent for their own benefit? How can we ensure that reports, decisions and other outcomes of EQA activities do not just end up on institution managements' desks but also become something student organisations actively use? What initiatives could encourage greater utilisation of EQA among students?

2. How is it possible to strike a balance between different interests and maintain good relations?

AI is an authority which must consider the needs of and nurture relations with



educational institutions, with which we have professional, long-standing cooperation. With the establishment of STAR, we now have a strategic and formal framework for collaboration with student bodies for whom we also serve as a secretariat. This gives AI the role of an authority vis-à-vis the institutions, while we also have formal collaboration partnerships with both institutions and students. These stakeholders often have different interests, as well as interests that differ from AI's interests. How should a QAA navigate these diverging interests in the best possible way? How should one handle the role of being both an authority and a secretariat, and is it possible to find common ground so that all interests have space and are accommodated? How far should and can an authority go to ensure strategic cooperation with students?

3. How does a QAA internally handle yet another stakeholder who voices his/her opinion and wants to participate in the decision-making?

Only a few AI employees are involved in STAR collaboration and facilitation at practical level. Although the entire organisation supports STAR and student involvement, there is not always agreement about how and the extent to which STAR should be involved in the design of our accreditation concept or in our external communication, for example. There is a new voice that AI needs to take account of. How should the individual consultants be best prepared, as they are often responsible for ensuring that the changes STAR has helped decide are implemented in practice?

How should the organisation tackle internal disagreements on how to accommodate students' wishes for an informal language style in the communication targeted at students, for example? A style that is nothing like what is used elsewhere in the organisation and which some employees are not confident using.