Students' feedback has two faces

Serafina Pastore, Giuseppe Crescenzo, Michele Chiusano, Vincenzo Campobasso
UNIVERSITY OF BARI, ITALY

OVERVIEW:

- Focus on the role played by feedback in the process of higher education quality assurance;

- Overview of the Italian quality assurance system;

- Outline the challenges that must be covered in the implementation of a comprehensive quality assurance system.

PERSPECTIVES

- Deep transformations in the higher education systems around the world (Dorothea *et al.*, 2015; Pricopie *et al.*, 2015).

- The *umbrella* concept of quality in higher education (Romainville, 1999; Gibbs, 2010; Marshall, 2016; Williams, 2016);

- The recognition of quality assurance as a pivotal element in educational governance;

- The role of students' feedback in the process of quality assurance.

IN THIS FRAMEWORK...

The student surveys have become one of the largest and most frequently used data sources for quality assurance in higher education (Klemencic & Chirikov, 2015) because they can serve, at the same time, to three different aims (Nasser & Fresko, 2002):

1. A formative one, for the instructional improvement;

2. A summative one, in relation to staff tenure and promotion purposes;

3. An informative one, in order to guarantee detailed and accurate information to students who are going to select degree courses.

GOOD INTENTIONS...

These surveys «were introduced for various reasons relating to accountability, such as justifying the investment of public money and assuring the quality of provision to a range of stakeholders as well as making a contribution to informing students regarding their choice of institution» (Yorke 2013: 6).
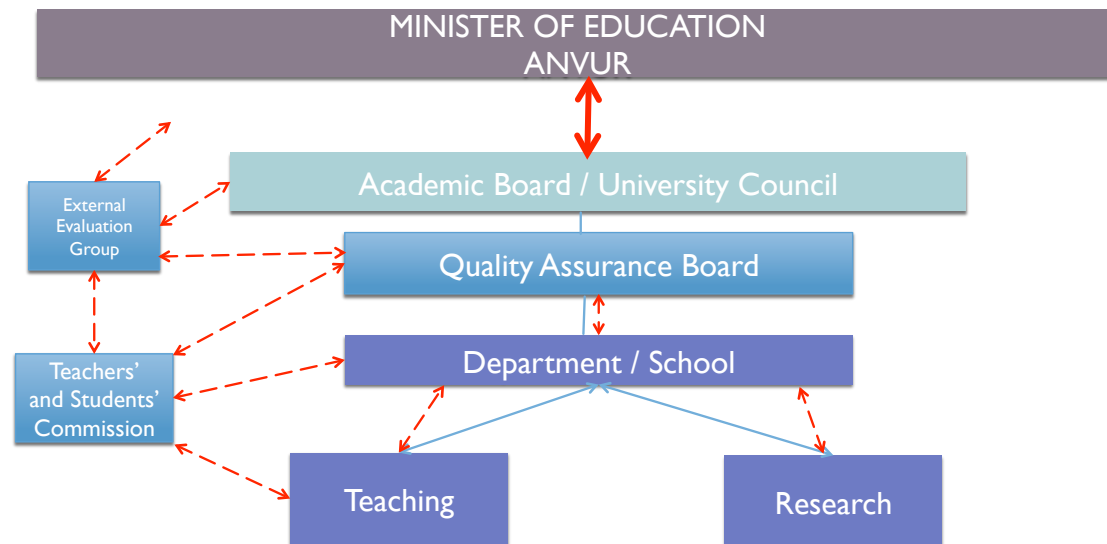
... BAD PRACTICES

- Students' evaluations about their teachers are still perceived as a source of anxiety and irritation both among students and teachers (Bryan & Clegg, 2006);

- Furthermore, scant is the evidence that this kind of assessment really supports improvements in higher education systems, and less conclusive is the evidence about their validity (Kember *et al.*, 2002; Algozzine *et al.*, 2004).

- Although a considerable debate about student evaluation fairness and worth, some scholars still confirm that these forms of evaluation are multidimensional, quite reliable, reasonably valid, relatively uncontaminated by many variables (Richardson, 2005) .

A PIT-STOP: THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN ITALY

- The attempts to introduce assessment and evaluation processes within the Italian higher education system can be traced back in the early '80ies. Since 2004, however, this system has had to deal with radical transformations as a result of economic, policy, and social innovations (Bonaccorsi, 2015).

- The University Reform Law n. 240/2010 introduced a new idea of university through different process of assessment and evaluation that have interested three main areas: teaching-learning quality, scientific research, and administrative management.

THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS IN ITALY:

MINISTER OF EDUCATION
ANVUR

External Evaluation Group

Academic Board / University Council

Quality Assurance Board

Teachers' and Students' Commission

Department / School

Teaching

Research

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN STUDENTS' SURVEYS (1/2)

- Student surveys are designed and implemented to gather valid and reliable evidence on the strengths and weaknesses of any higher education institutions. Despite the yet unresolved theoretical and psychometric issues (e.g., focus on teacher efficacy, student perceptions, or student satisfaction), student surveys can serve different assessment purposes, for different stakeholder, and at different levels (micro, meso, and macro level):

- Data collection is a crucial aspect in order to guarantee and support an effective decision-making. Therefore, data and feedback provided by students need to be, not only valid and reliable, but also aware, meaningful, and useful in order to support the improvement process.

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN STUDENTS' SURVEYS (2/2)

Following Richardson (2005) there are several issues and political problems to be thoroughly considered:

- How the feedback is interpreted;
- What is the institutional reward;
- How is the feedback made public;
- To whom does the feedback belong (to the teachers and/or to the students).

- Other aspects must also be considered: for example, even though students are involved in the process providing their feedback (to teachers and to the other stakeholders of the quality assurance process), often they do not see the rationale of this action and therefore experience difficulty in understanding and contextualizing results (Porter, 2013).

WHAT ABOUT ITALY?

- While the student surveys, across Europe, have become the largest and most frequently used data sources of quality assurance in higher education (Klemencic and Chirikov 2015), in Italy, the students' behavior of compliance in filling the end-module questionnaire (mandatory) and a strong sense of disaffection represent the increasing malpractices within the quality assurance system.

AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY TO GATHER STUDENTS' FEEDBACK

- In order to understand what hindrances, conceptions, and representations students have of the quality assurance process, as well as of their university, a round of informal auditions has been realized during the 2017 fall semester to a sample of student representatives who joined the 23 departments of the University of Bari.

THE PRESENT STUDY

- This study is qualitative in nature. In order to assure a number of methodological possibilities within the interpretative paradigm, a phenomenological methodology was used to explore students' points of view about assessment and quality assurance process, teaching quality, university facilities, etc.

- All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of anonymity and confidentiality and voluntarily consented to participate.

- Semi-structured interviews were used. Each interview was audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and coded.

THE INTERVIEW

- The interview, composed by 20 questions, was divided into four sections following the ANVUR Guidelines for degree courses accreditation (focus on students' perspective):

  1. Students' active involvement in the quality assurance process;

  2. Teaching quality;

  3. Information and training paths for student representatives;

  4. University services and facilities.

DATA ANALYSIS

- 100 interviews have been gathered. The dataset for this study is large and so what is presented here is only a selection of main inquiry categories. Although collected information is sensitive, some inferences can be made.

- A cross-checking procedure of independently-coded data was used by the author and two research assistants who discussed findings to ensure consistency of the analysis (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004). Cohen's Kappa index has been performed as a measure of the agreement between researchers. The Kappa value at all (.75) and the K value of the coding categories (among .61 and .75) indicate a good level of agreement and an adequate level of inter-coder reliability.

DATA ANALYSIS: FOCUS ON MAIN CRITICALITIES FOR STUDENTS

- Students underline their need for more confortable, new, technologically equipped spaces. There are relevant differences between the 23 Departments of the Bari University...(e.g. humanities among science), for this reason student ask for more "equity" (Section 4).

- Student representatives admit that, sometimes, they are not informed about the rationale of the quality assurance process. As a consequence their role in the quality assurance groups within each Department is not effective. For this reason they ask for a specific training path on quality assurance (the process, the rationale, the documents and their role in the process) (Section 3).

DATA ANALYSIS: FOCUS ON MAIN CRITICALITIES FOR STUDENTS

- Interviewed students confirm that the most problematic aspect in teaching activities, lectures, and modules is the redundancy of content knowledge and the scant link with practical aspect of the professional learning outcomes. Other activities such as internationalization, orientation, peer tutoring, often are not effectively designed and implemented (Section 2).

- Students representatives confirm that generally students are disaffected with the quality assurance process. When they fill the end-course questionnaire (mandatory for the access to the exam) they clearly admit a compliant behaviour. They don't think that this instrument can really assure the anonymity and are scared about consequences for their replies (Section 1).

THE NEXT STEP: THE COMMUNICATION PLAN OF THE QA BOARD

**Videos
Explanations
Brochure
Meeting and colloquium
with students**

- Design and implement training paths for student representatives;

- Information about the quality assurance process (aims, rationale, process, instruments, actors involved, documents);

- Disseminate the culture of quality in order to reduce compliance behaviour and other malpractices in the assessment field (teachers and students);

- Foster the active involvement and participation of students in the quality assurance process;

- Develop student assessment literacy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- There is a wide recognition that feedback is an integral part of teaching, learning, and assessment, but results coming from the study showed that the way to an aware acknowledgement of its centrality for the sake of teaching/learning quality is still challenging.

- Certainly, improving feedback is not a matter of finding a magic bullet, especially in a context like the Italian one, where there is a great level of bureaucratization of evaluation and where students have a lot of practical difficulties to be active and involved partners in the quality assurance process

REFERENCES

Algozzine, B., Beattie, J., Bray, M., Flowers, C., Gretes, J., Howley, L., Mohanty, G. & Spooner, F., 2004, 'Student evaluation of college teaching: A practice in search of principles', *College Teaching*, 52(4), pp. 134–141 .

Bonaccorsi, A., 2015, 'Insititutions of public science and new search regimes', in Dorothea, J., Pruisken, I. (Eds.), *The Changing Governance of Higher Education and Research Multilevel Perspectives* (Dordrecht, Springer).

Bryan, C. & Clegg, K. (Eds.), 2006, *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* (London and New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis).

Dorothea, J., & Pruisken, I. (Eds.), *The Changing Governance of Higher Education and Research Multilevel Perspectives* (Dordrech, Springer).

Gibbs, G., 2010, *Dimensions of Quality* (York, UK, Higher Education Academy).

Kember, D., Leung D.Y.P. & Kwan, K.P., 2002, 'Does the use of student feedback questionnaires improve the overall quality of teaching?', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27(5), pp. 411–425.

Klemenčič, M. & Chiricov, I., 2015, 'On the use of student surveys', in Pricopie, R., Scott, P,. Salmi, J. & Curaj, A. (Eds.), *Future of Higher Education in Europe*. Volume I and Volume II (Dordrecht, Springer).

Marshall, S. (2016), 'Quality as sense-making', *Quality in Higher Education*, 22(3), pp. 213–227.

Nasser, F. & Fresko, B., 2002, 'Faculty views of student evaluation of college teaching', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27(2), pp. 187–198.

Porter, S., 2013, 'Do college student surveys have any validity?', *Review of Higher Education*, 35(1), pp. 45–76.

Pricopie, R., Scott, P., Salmi, J., & Curaj A. (Eds.), 2015, *Future of Higher Education in Europe,* Volume I and Volume II (Dordrecht, Springer).

Richardson, J., 2005, 'Instruments for obtaining student feedback: a review of the literature', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), pp. 387–415.

Romainville, M., 1999, 'Quality evaluation of teaching in higher education', *Higher Education in Europe*, 24(3), pp. 415–424.

Williams, J., 2016 'Quality assurance and quality enhancement: is there a relationship?', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 22(2), pp. 97–102.

Yorke, M., 2013, 'Surveys of the student experience and the politics of feedback', in Stephen, M., Price, M., Carless, D. & Taras, M. (Eds.), *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education* (Abingdon, Routledge).

serafina.pastore@uniba.it