

Student involvement in the quality of education: a win-win situation

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By getting involved in the quality of their education, students achieve better education outcomes and simultaneously help improve the quality of education with their feedback. In other words, student involvement creates a win-win situation. The positive effects of student involvement are highlighted in the interviews that the National Reference Point for EQAVET¹ conducted with students and teaching staff in four European countries: the Netherlands, Estonia, Denmark and Norway.

How important is student involvement in the quality of education to you? Read this article to be inspired by their example, and ask yourself the following four questions:

- Do students feel sufficiently secure and at liberty to speak their minds?
- Do you feel students should be able to provide feedback about your performance?
- Do your students see the benefits of their involvement?
- Do you give off the impression that student feedback is important to you?

Do students feel sufficiently secure and at liberty to speak their minds?

Students from Estonia's Tartu Kunstikool indicate that they are highly motivated to attend school, because they feel at home there and are under the impression that their

opinion matters. They state that teaching staff are open-minded, willing to listen and ready to try new things. From stories told by friends who attend other schools in Estonia, they know that their situation is quite unique. Whether a school's students feel sufficiently

secure and at liberty to give their opinion on the quality of the education is dependent on the school's approach and atmosphere. When students enrol at Tartu Kunstikool, they are often not used to having a voice that

counts. Instead, they are mainly preoccupied with their own lives, seemingly apathetic and unwilling to take responsibility and get involved. It is therefore up to teaching staff to keep students engaged. It is key for teaching staff to demonstrate through their attitude that student involvement is important to them and that it yields tangible

'Because I have a say in the quality of education, I learn better', according to a student from Norway

¹ The National Reference Point for EQAVET works to improve quality assurance in Dutch upper secondary vocational education by order of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. One of its focus areas is to involve students in the quality of education.

results. In addition, they should strive to make it easier for students to provide feedback. Students who are already involved in the quality of education also have a role to play in keeping their peers engaged. It is often easier for students to be convinced by their peers than by teaching staff. Tartu Kunstikool's example shows that students will eventually change their attitude, learn how to provide feedback and reap the rewards.

The school is currently looking into ways to make it easier to provide feedback online and immediately after the fact. A number of tools are available in the Netherlands for this purpose, such as www.onzeles.nl. In addition to these forms of direct feedback, Estonia is also developing structured ways to gather feedback from all students, both nationally and at the level of individual schools. This work is done online as much as possible.

A teacher at Tartu Kunstikool observes that there were many positive developments in Estonian education last year. Student involvement in the quality of education goes hand in hand with these changes and is set to become increasingly important in the years to come. After all, the teacher says, we are unable to provide quality education if we do not know how our students feel about it.

Are students able to provide feedback about your performance?

At Denmark's Campus Vejle, but at other schools in Denmark as well, the annual survey is an important tool for gathering feedback from students. This survey is used to evaluate the quality of education and the performance of both teaching staff and students. The manager we interviewed, who had worked as a teacher for a long time himself, stressed the importance of assessing the performance of both. The questions are compiled by teaching staff from various schools. As for the assessment of the students, they are asked such questions as 'Did you prepare well for this class?', 'Are you

able to concentrate?' and 'Are you learning what you want to learn?'. As for the assessment of teaching staff, students are asked to answer questions like 'Does the teacher motivate me sufficiently?', 'Does the teacher explain things clearly?' and 'Does the teacher pay enough attention to what we as students consider important?'. The teacher receives the outcomes of the survey and analyses them. He or she then uses this analysis to discuss the outcomes with students: do the students recognise the outcomes, what is the explanation for certain outcomes, do they have anything to add, etc.? Based on this discussion, the teacher writes a reflection on the outcomes and submits it to the manager. The manager is then able to use this information to form an opinion about the quality of education.

The survey outcomes constitute vital input for the school's annual education quality improvement plan. This annual plan is used to complete the PDCA cycle. It has been a great success: the manager indicates that about 95% of each year's annual plan is put into action. The school management draws up a first draft of the plan. This is discussed in groups of six teachers and amended based on their feedback. Next, a group composed of teaching staff and managers coordinates the implementation of the annual plan and takes the lead in determining what action to take. In the end, all teaching staff are responsible for implementing improvements. Teaching staff are pleased with both their involvement in the annual plans and its content. Data gathered at the national level, which are fed back to the schools by the government, form another important source of input for the annual plan. The data gathered by the schools is also submitted to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry uses this data to assess the quality of education and inform policy.

In addition, the manager uses the survey outcomes to review the performance of

teaching staff. Teaching staff are satisfied that the outcomes are treated in confidence – after all, they are all dedicated professionals who know what they are good at and what they need to improve. The role of the manager is to reward this trust. To do so, points for improvement need to be discussed openly and there needs to be room for personal development. Another factor is that teaching staff who perform poorly are generally exposed at an early stage and in a different way. The chance of any major issues coming to light as a result of the survey is therefore relatively small.

According to the manager, he has worked with this method of gathering input from students for more than 20 years, first as a teacher and now as a manager. He indicates that this is common practice, both at his school and throughout Denmark. Moreover, he feels it would be impossible for teaching staff who do not value student input to continue, as it is part of our job.

Do your students see the benefits of their involvement?

Students at Norway's Slåtthaug videregående skolein state without prompting that they learn better when they are involved in the quality of education. They highlight the importance of the relationships you develop with your teachers and with your fellow students. Engaging each other in conversation leads to a build-up of trust, the removal of barriers and more solidarity in class. By way of an example, one of the students says this has made him appreciate his teachers more and become more accepting of their advice. One of the teachers recounts how increased student involvement has helped him appreciate what they are capable of and what they are yet to learn. On the whole, teaching staff consider it part of their teaching duties to involve students. This mainly takes place in an informal way, and teaching staff are free to decide how to do this. As a consequence of this informal

character, teaching staff are less likely to work on improvements based on student input as a group. Although the teaching staff at this Norwegian school would like to do more in this regard, they stress that this is often impossible in practice, due to a lack of time and structure. Teaching staff feel that they would be able to learn more from each other if they cooperated more closely, e.g. by analysing outcomes together. However, it should be pointed out that student feedback about a certain class does not necessarily apply to other classes or teachers.

In addition to their involvement in class, students also complete an annual survey about the school as a social learning environment, containing such questions as 'Are you able to learn well here?', 'Do you feel at home?', 'Do you have enough friends at school?', etc. This is mainly about the school as a social environment and about student well-being at the school. The survey is carried out nationwide, and its main objective is to assess school performance and compare schools with each other.

This Norwegian school's example highlights the importance of relationships with regard to quality. Mutual respect and agreement about what works well and what does not creates an environment that is beneficial to learning.

Do you give off the impression that student feedback is important to you?

The Economics & Business teaching staff of Regional Education and Training Centre (ROC) de Leijgraaf in the Netherlands recently started working with the Hack Your Class method to improve the quality of education. Hack Your Class involves 'hacking' a class (www.hackjeles.nl). The two hackers, former students both, take over the class temporarily to discuss the quality of education and arrive at a specific action plan. One of the questions they tackle is 'What would your programme look like if you could

organise it yourself?'. The hackers help the students convert their ideas into specific step-by-step guides. At the end of the class, the students will have completed action plans that they can implement with each other and with their teacher. According to one of ROC de Leijgraaf's students, the Hack Your Class method made her feel that she could make a meaningful contribution to the quality of education. After all, she not only gave feedback, but also got to grips with action plans. As a result, students had a considerable say in the changes implemented. The student also told us that she no longer felt sidelined, but empowered to contribute. Furthermore, she appreciated that no topic was off-limits during the Hack Your Class session; students were free to mention any problems they had.

Student ownership is key for the Economics & Business teaching staff. Students are building a future for themselves, a process in which their

education plays a major role. It is important, therefore, that they are actively involved, know what they want and get to exert influence. In addition, student involvement fits with ROC de Leijgraaf's overall focus on human potential. Each person has talents and ambitions. Active involvement allows students to realise their ambitions and makes them feel that they are in control of their own education. The teacher stresses that it is important for teaching staff that the management appreciates their curiosity and openness to student feedback. When receiving feedback, deferring your judgement is essential. Teaching staff should be careful to not come up with all kinds of objections and excuses to avoid dealing with points for improvement.

'Do not think for
students, but along with
students'

To turn this high level of involvement into tangible results, it is vital that student involvement is supported at all levels of the organisation, from the classroom to the executive board. In an interview, a member of ROC de Leijgraaf's executive board tells us that, in her opinion, student involvement should be at the forefront of all her activities. 'Our policy to organise our education in collaboration with students should not be an empty promise.' For example, the executive board has allocated funds for the establishment of an alumni society, has asked the student council to outline what kind of resources it needs to do its work properly and organises an event where students can pitch their ideas about improving education. The executive board is

looking for ways to make it as attractive as possible for students to take part in this event, for example by turning the pitch into an aptitude test and awarding a prize for the best idea. The best persons to ask what

makes it attractive for students to take part are the students themselves, because they know best what motivates them.

On top of ROC de Leijgraaf's approach, all schools in the Netherlands are legally required to convene a student council and are subject to a monitor executed by the JOB, the Association of Students in Senior Secondary Vocational Education. This association represents the interests of Dutch students in upper secondary vocational education, and its board is made up of these same students. Among other things, the JOB compiles the JOB Monitor and processes the results. These results are fed back to schools to allow them to improve their education.

At ROC de Leijgraaf, the idea is not to think for students, but along with students – not just when it comes to assessing the quality of education, but with regard to planning ahead as well. 'Thinking along with students' in this way creates a strong sense of community, provides students with additional learning opportunities and yields a treasure trove of good ideas.

What is your answer to these questions?

The above case studies from four European countries demonstrate how students can be involved in the quality of education and the great results to which this can lead. On the one hand, students become more involved in their education and achieve better outcomes. On the other, teaching staff are supplied with great ideas to improve the quality of education. In addition to being part of the duties of teaching staff, student involvement can also be expressed in a more formal, structured way, for instance in the form of student councils. Both forms of student involvement can be beneficial. Above all, teaching staff need to recognise the importance of student involvement for it to become part of the education process. They need to accept that there can be no quality education without student involvement. This involves maintaining a receptive attitude to students' ideas, not being afraid of their opinions, having confidence in your own performance as a teacher, being satisfied that the outcomes are treated in confidence and paying attention to your relationship with students. If these conditions are met, teaching staff will be able to develop the skills they need, such as creating an

atmosphere in which students feel secure and at liberty, listening and understanding what students are saying, learning to analyse the outcomes of student assessments, introducing changes based on feedback and reporting back to students about the action prompted by the outcomes. Each case study has been expressed as a question. How would you answer these questions with regard to your team or school's education or students?

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