The International Student's Voice: can it make a difference? Enhancing the International Student's Learning Experience
La voce dello studente internazionale può fare la differenza? Migliorare l'esperienza di apprendimento dello studente internazionale

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ABSTRACT

While Quality Assurance and Enhancement (QA&E) practices and processes have been at the heart of the Higher Education debate across Europe for over 20 years (Harvey and Williams, 2010), Italian universities have only recently (2013) begun to implement (with some resistance) compulsory external QA&E mechanisms (ANVUR)[1]. Any attempt to enhance the learning experience in HE is welcome, in particular those which promote excellence in teaching, but whether these external processes (ENQA, 2009)[2] will have the desired impact remains to be seen (cfr Henard & Roseveare, 2012). Indeed, studies have shown (e.g. Greere & Riley in print, Harvey & Williams, 2010) that even in countries where such mechanisms have long been the norm and external quality processes (QA) have become ritualised, there is little evidence that this has translated into the creation of a quality culture, actively engaging all stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators and quality managers) in promoting quality (QE) (Räsänen, 2013). Indeed, while there have long been calls for the development of a quality culture 'on the ground' (EUA, 2006; ENQA, 2009; Vettori, 2012), the literature lacks reports of successful bottom-up practices which result in such a culture. This study will present one such case study.

Thanks to the election of an international student on the Student-Teacher Committee at the School of International Studies, a need to address issues specifically regarding international students emerged. As part of the EU funded SPEAQ project (Sharing Practices to Enhance and Assure Quality), a micro-project was thus developed which would engage international students in identifying possible actions and initiatives to address these issues. While the project aimed to enhance the learning experience of International Students through both formal and informal QA&E mechanisms, it was hoped positive outcomes would also benefit local students.

Mentre in tutta Europa è da vent'anni che i processi e metodi dell'assicurazione della qualità (QA&E) del sistema universitario sono al centro del dibattito sul miglioramento dell'offerta didattica (Harvey & Williams, 2010), in Italia è stato introdotto un sistema obbligatorio di valutazione esterno (con non poche resistenze) solo recentemente (ANVUR, 2013). Ogni tentativo di migliorare la qualità dell'esperienza universitaria è da sostenere, in particolare quelli che promuovono l'eccellenza nella didattica, ma l'impatto effettivo che avranno questi processi esterni (ENQA, 2009)[3] è impossibile da immaginare (ved. Henard & Roseveare, 2012). Infatti, come risulta in vari studi (es. Greere & Riley in print, Harvey and Williams, 2010), anche in paesi dove i processi di valutazione (QA) sono la norma e il sistema esterno imposto dalle agenzie è ormai una routine, non ci sono indicazioni che questa esperienza si sia tradotta nella creazione di una cultura della qualità che coinvolga tutti gli attori (studenti, insegnanti, amministrativi e delegati della qualità) nella promozione attiva della qualità (QE) (Räsänen, 2013). C'è ormai da tempo un consenso sulla necessità di sviluppare questa cultura della qualità 'sul campo' (EUA, 2006; ENQA, 2009; Vettori, 2012), ma finora, vi è una carenza di studi che riportino positive pratiche dal basso verso l'alto, che hanno come esito una cultura di qualità. Questo studio presenterà un caso del genere.

In seguito all'elezione di uno studente internazionale alla Commissione Paritetica presso la Scuola di Studi Internazionali all'Università di Trento, è emersa la necessità di affrontare alcune questioni riguardanti specificamente studenti internazionali. Nell'ambito di un progetto finanziato dall'UE, "the SPEAQ project" (Sharing Practices to Enhance and Assure Quality), si è dato vita a un progetto locale che ha coinvolto studenti internazionali nell'individuare azioni e iniziative possibili per far fronte alle questioni sollevate. Sebbene lo scopo del progetto fosse di migliorare l'esperienza e l'apprendimento degli studenti stranieri attraverso meccanismi formali e informali del QA&E, si è auspicato che eventuali risultati avrebbero portato benefici anche agli studenti locali.

Parole chiave: la voce dello studente internazionale, legittimazione, coinvolgimento, cooperazione, responsabilizzazione, la cultura della qualità.

KEYWORDS

The international student's voice, Empowerment, Engagement, Shared responsibility, Culture of the quality.
Voce degli studenti internazionali, Empowerment, Impegno, Responsabilità condivisa, Cultura della qualità.

1 ANVUR – Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca (i.e. the Italian national quality assurance agency). Not having met the strict membership requirements in full, ANVUR is not currently a full member of ENQA, the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies, but was awarded affiliate membership in September 2013.

2 The ESG (European Standards and Guidelines, ENQA, 2009) make a clear distinction between internal (i.e. institutional) QA mechanisms and external (i.e. agency-based) QA instruments. See also The Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions Report of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education on the importance of an interplay between internal and external mechanisms (2013, p. 24).

3 The ESG make a clear distinction between internal (i.e. institutional) QA mechanisms and external (i.e. agency-based) QA instruments.

1. International or Italianational? - Setting the scene

Higher Education Institutions across Europe are currently plagued by a series of competing pressures: cutting costs while at the same time assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and research, and promoting internationalisation. Given, rightly or wrongly, that internationalisation is a widely-accepted priority (Hughes, 2008, p. 4; OECD, 2012), a priority highlighted in the strategic plan of the Rector of the Trento University, then it would follow that guaranteeing a quality experience for international students is an institutional prerogative. However, while the University of Trento International Office offers support and guidance to prospective students and the 'Welcome Office', in the students' own words (Riley, 2013b), provides excellent support with practical matters, there is no such support to foster integration into the new academic environment. Such things as navigating the website to find barely intelligible (to them) study programmes ('manifesti degli studi') written in obscure codes ('settori scientifici disciplinari' - SSD), understanding the difference between compulsory core subjects, optional courses ('scelte vincolate') and electives, trying to find out about (compulsory) language classes, which often clash with core subjects etc., can often make the initial impact at best a challenge at times demotivating and at worst demoralising. While once they have understood the system most students are happy to stay at Trento, the first impact students report on experiencing[4] is not so much the expected international[5] experience, but rather an Italianational approach. By this they mean that while the course is in English and actively welcomes international students, it is very deeply embedded in the Italian academic culture. This is not necessarily a negative thing, indeed many of them choose to come to Trento because they want to study in Italy. However, undoubtedly, and something agreed upon unanimously by all participants in the project, there is ample room for improvement[6].

This paper narrates the story of a micro project whose specific aim was to give international students a voice in not only identifying (often perceived as complaining about) aspects which would ease there entrance into the new learning environment, but more importantly, would give them the opportunity to have an active role in enhancing their own learning experience at the University of Trento. Moreover, in sharing and discussing their proposals with their local peers, faculty members and administrative staff, and thus actively engaging all actors in the proposed initiatives and actions, is perfectly in line with the aims of the broader European funded project SPEAQ (SPEAQ, 2013) of which the Trento project was a part.

4   All the comments included in this paper are fully documented within the project (Riley, 2013b) which regards a single Master's degree course (Laurea Magistrale) and therefore are not intended as generalisations.
5   It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the myriad interpretations of 'international programmes' and internationalisation. We are dealing here with **students'** perceptions and expectations – not those in the literature.
6   See Vincent-Lancrin & Pfotenhaur (2012) for a guideline to quality and international programmes. See also the Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education CoE (2002).

2. Spinning in Circles - The LANQUA Model and SPEAQ

The SPEAQ project[7] drew directly on the outcomes of LANQUA (Language Network for Quality Assurance 2010), a previous EU project. In particular the LANQUA Quality Model, originally developed by and for language teachers, was adopted and extended beyond language courses to other discipline courses and indeed the whole higher education experience for students, including QA&E processes themselves. The model is based on an iterative, or cyclic approach to quality and draws on the work of Donald Schön (1983), which centres on the reflective practitioner, or in the case of SPEAQ reflective stakeholders. Of particular importance is 'reflection in action', or as Schön called it 'thinking on your feet'.
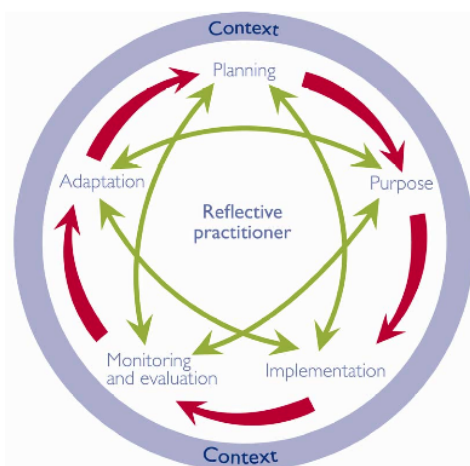

Fig. 1 - The LANQUA Model[8]

The LANQUA Model can be adapted to and should take account of the context of action, be it national, cultural, academic, discipline, administrative or political/policy making. For each 'stage' in the cycle a specific Quality Question can be asked:

1. Planning: overview and process - What are we trying to do?
2. Purpose: objectives and outcomes – Why are we trying to do it?
3. Implementation: methods – How are we going to do it?
4. Monitoring and evaluation: results and feedback – How will we know that it works?
5. Adaptation: revision and modification – How will we be able to improve it?

While the original questions used the pronoun 'you', for the SPEAQ project at Trento, the preferred pronoun was 'we' to emphasise the inclusive approach to

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7   A two-year LLP-Erasmus funded project.
8   For a more detailed overview of the model see http://www.LANQUA.eu/sites/default/files/LANQUA_quality_model.pdf

quality. Indeed, the fundamental characteristic of the SPEAQ-Trento adaptation of the model is that all stakeholders, teachers, students, administrators and quality managers engage in the quality cycle[9], continuously interacting and sharing their reflections and actions with each other. Moreover, the quality cycle cannot/should not stop (r)evolving, even if the actors change. The Trento project, in fact, is on-going, with a new intake of students taking over from and expanding on what their former colleagues started.

Each stakeholder brings to the discussion a different but equally valid perspective(ESU, 2013). This is an idea the Trento project tried to not only recognise but to promote. Indeed, in many national contexts, including Italy, the student voice has been, and still is given little space and often goes unheard (ESU, 2012), if not wilfully ignored. For example, few students have faith in the end of course questionnaires actually being heeded, something found to be a common feeling across Europe (Greere and Riley in print). Similarly, students do not have great faith in their influence on Student-Teacher committees or other University institutional organs. At Trento the President of the student council felt it necessary to send a plea to all departments to ask that the student representatives be given due attention in discussions regarding the strategic plan[10]. The SPEAQ project aimed to address such issues, actively encouraging all stakeholders to engage in dialogue and speak out.

3. Let the choir sing out[11] giving voice to international students

The Trento project had a two-pronged approach. **Firstly,** through the election of a Mexican student to the **Student-Teacher Committee** a direct voice was given to international students to air their opinions and make suggestions. That international students have different issues to local students had not fully been realised before hand or had been addressed on a situation by situation basis. What is more, though it is perhaps risky to generalise from a single case study, international students often have a different perspective on more general issues, and are thus able to make a valid and valued contribution to the work of the Student-Teacher Committee, through their representative. This was particularly the case in semi-formal meetings of the Committee where more open discussions of issues took place. In addition, the exchange of information was two-way. This forum provided an opportunity for the international representative, and through him his international colleagues, to fully understand how the Italian HE system worked, not least the 'straight-jacket' imposed by the degree class. Before these discus-

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9   Trowler 2010 shows how there is no consensus on what student engagement in QA&E actually means, and a similar observation might be made for the engagement of other stakeholders (see also Trowler & Trowler 2010). However, in this study it is intended as active participation in discussions, debates and initiatives both inside and outside the classroom in both formal and informal contexts in line with Kuh *et al's* (2007) definition (in Trowle, 2010, p. 7, also Harrison & Marzetti's, 2013). Kahu's four perspectives of engagement provide a further way of defining engagement (Kahu, 2013).

10   Student Council Motion 7/13 19 September 2013.

11   The author, a linguist more than an acdemic, realises that such explicit use of metaphor may not have a place in academic journals, but given the focus of the paper – the student voice – hopes this rhetorical device will enhance rather than detract from the paper.

sions, the structure of the degree course had seemed, to international eyes, somewhat arbitrary and restrictive in the courses offered. Upon understanding that much of the macro-structure is dictated by the Italian Ministry for Instruction, Universities and Research (MIUR), while not always in agreement, they more readily accepted the overall structure of the degree, such as two foreign languages, the high number of compulsory courses, the comparably high number of classroom hours leaving little time for self-study etc.

Secondly, a series of **informal focus groups and workshops** with international student volunteers took place over the academic year, continuing well into the summer, the last meeting taking place in late July 2013.

The first focus groups provided an open forum to discuss both the positive and negative impressions and experiences of the international students at the SIS. Many aspects relating to the academic culture and life in general were discussed. Students expressed perplexities about such things as the strict language requirements for admission while professors are not subjected to the same requirements (unlike in most northern European countries) and teaching methods, found in general to be rather more knowledge driven than skills and competence driven. In other words, very much 'talk and chalk' or 'sage on a stage', as frequently found in Mediterranean HEIs (Riley, 2013a, Taillefer 2013), and fewer seminar/tutorial/interactive/student driven activities, which are generally expected on so-called 'international' Master's degrees. A comment made by more than one student was that the Master's course was more like an Italian degree in English than an international degree, both in teaching methods and structure, i.e. marked by rigid disciplinary courses[12], rather than thematic, interdisciplinary, co-taught courses, which are the hallmark of comparable international programmes.

In fact, the international students were very keen to discuss the content and teaching methods of the degree course and had many suggestions on how best to restructure the whole curriculum and what kind of activities and approaches might help achieve the degree's ambitious learning objectives. Students even suggested that professors might benefit from some teacher training. They did not question the professors' expertise and breadth and depth of knowledge, but they realised that being an expert in one's field does not automatically mean being an excellent teacher. Upon learning about the kinds of programme of compulsory professional pedagogical development all professors undergo in Scandinavian countries (e.g. Räsänen, 2013), students wondered why the same does not happen in Italy, but realised they had little power to affect such sweeping changes requiring a change in mentality as much as a change in regulations.

Moreover, given the small scale of the project, coupled with their lack of knowledge of the system and the restrictive ministerial framework which the students were only just beginning to understand, led to the decision to focus on more easily achievable and concrete aims.

The students themselves realised that many of their grievances, were not so much a question of Trento not providing for their requirements, but due to a lack of information. Or rather, difficulty in finding and understanding information at all stages of their experience, from being prospective students, through the ap-

12 In a personal communication (November 2013), a recent visiting (international) professor made a similar comment regarding the programme content, likening it to high school subjects rather than post graduate studies developing analytical and applied skills, including the transversal skills identified in the Dublin Descriptors.

plication process, to arriving and studying in Trento, led to some disappointed expectations, several misunderstandings, and even hindered their successful integration into the Trento academic environment. A lack of transparency and clarity and even availability of information in English or even Italian affected understanding of such things as: the relatively little degree of choice in courses; that Italian cannot be considered one of the compulsory foreign language (there being no SSD for Italian as an L2); understanding the grade system; how to enrol for courses at the language centre etc. It was therefore decided to focus on improving the information itself and exploring different channels of information.

4. Mixing musical genres - Formal and Informal QA&E channels combined

Having an international student representative as part of the informal part of the project, meant a two way filter. The student's greater insight into the mechanisms of degree courses was transferred to the other students, and the input and ideas from the focus groups filtered through to the formal forum of the student teacher committee. More specifically from both the formal and informal quality channels, the following courses of possible action were identified:

– producing Study Guidelines for International Students to promote swifter and improved integration into the new learning context;
– inviting and, wherever possible, acting upon suggestions regarding all aspects of the learning experience, including information/communication channels, student support and services, and informal QA channels and processes and, not least, teaching/learning practices in the international classroom;
– helping shape policy decisions regarding international students/internationalisation[13];
– initiating a discussion on the aims and objectives of the degree course, in particular with regard to learning objectives and graduate profile.

Even though many of the points raised were heard through the official QA channels, given the time official mechanisms and procedures take to implement decisions, the group of students felt they themselves could translate many of their proposals into concrete outcomes (or 'deliverables' in EU-speak) which would enhance the learning environment at the SIS during their own academic career. Thus in spring 2013 a student-led project, An aMEISing Project, was undertaken. Interestingly, some local students asked to participate alongside their international colleagues, collaboration which was gladly accepted. Opening up the project to local students, while not strictly in the official project plan, had the added benefit of including yet another student perspective. Part of the project thus became integrated with a second year elective course, the Advanced English Workshop and students were able to use the project as part of their continuous assessment assignments for this course.

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13 From the SPEAQ project flyer http://speaqproject.wordpress.com/resources/

5. An aMEISing Project - Quality Assurance from the bottom up[14]

This micro-project is outlined in detail in the project report (Riley, 2013) and in a short article in the Trento University periodical *UNITN* written by two of the students (Scotton & Stroia, 2013)[15]. The idea for this student-driven project "sprang from the students' desire to see greater visibility and a stronger identity for the SIS at the local, national and international level" (Scotton & Stroia, 2013). The students were concerned that the image portrayed of the degree course itself, but more importantly of MEIS graduates, was unclear and even unconvincing, perhaps affecting their future employment prospects. Employability is widely acknowledged as a measure of quality and this is particularly perceived as a priority by students. Therefore, in addition to redesigning the website, editing (often drastically) the information provided both in Italian and English, creating specific pages for international students and creating an FAQ page, it was thought essential to redefine the graduate profile as portrayed on the website. Other novel (for Trento) proposals were: an alumni network set up through a face book group; a promotional video staged, directed and edited by the students; student testimonials to provide information on life in Trento from different perspectives (Italian, European, non-European) etc. This highly motivated and extremely dedicated group of ten students, in two working groups coordinated by a 'chair', put together the whole series of initiatives listed above, often learning new IT and multimedia skills in doing so. A presentation of their project, "An aMEISing Project: redesigning the MEIS from the students' perspective", was organised by the chair in May 2013 less than six weeks after identifying which initiatives to develop.

The presentation embodied in full the 'Sharing Practices' spirit of the SPEAQ project, inviting fellow students, faculty members and administrative staff to participate in this open forum. It is worth noting, that the students were very careful to embrace the principles of their own project by striving to communicate effectively with their target audience(s).

Fig. 2. Front of student-designed flier for the project presentation and open forum.

14 For a discussion of the importance of the importance of bottom-up processes in QA see Sursock, 2011.
15 Ironically, even though the project was student-driven, and about 'giving students a voice', *UNITN* would only allow this authorship under the supervision and 'guarantee' of a faculty member. This rather undermined the feeling of empowerment and legitimation the students had hitherto felt.

In fact the poster and flier of the event, intended to engage and inform, as well as use modern technology – the QR code was active and not just a gimmick. More importantly, the invitation "Let's find a way through together" had the dual purpose of intriguing the target audience, thanks to the wordplay between MEIS and 'maze' (a synonym for labyrinth), and promoting the more collaborative and inclusive approach to QA&E. The principle that QA&E should be owned by all stakeholders, even if not presented in these terms or in this language, lay at the very heart of this project. It is worth reiterating the fact that the students wanted to stimulate debate with the wider SIS community, not merely their classmates to set the quality cycle in motion.

6. Sing out loud, sing out strong, sing out long – listening to the learners

Nothing in the project was particularly ground-breaking, quite the opposite in fact. FAQ pages, alumni networks, dedicated pages for international students, check lists for applications, Facebook groups, twitter etc. are nothing new. One cannot but wonder why the website of one of Italy's most international universities should need such a major overhaul. The answer lies simply in the different perspective the student voice brings. Much of the information on the website is generated by administrators, who fully understand (their part) of the system but may have very little contact with students or even academic staff. They assume prospective/international students and future employers share similar knowledge to themselves, often a gross overestimation.

By not only listening to the students' perspective, but providing them with an opportunity to make concrete proposals, resulted in far more effective and **user-friendly** webpages. The 'users' in this instance being the students and the outside world, including prospective employers, rather than office-bound administrators. As the students were keen to underline, a university's website is its external image, it's calling card. Even the most rudimentary principles of marketing and indeed discourse/genre analysis (e.g. Bhatia, 2004) stress the importance of addressing your target audience. Precisely what the students managed to do with their demo website.

While not strictly related to the quality of teaching and learning, such things do have an impact on the overall student experience. Moreover, the potential value of the student's perspective should not be underestimated:

> This idea of a student quality concept can bring change in the field of quality in terms of transcending the discussion surrounding quality assurance and information provision to reflect the views of students as the main benefactors rather than simply other actors (ESU, 2012, p. 1).

7. Multiple voices making music – Achieving the aMEISing aims

In terms of the concrete aims the project was extremely successful. The official School website is currently incorporating many of the features from the project demo, the students were invited to work with the university technicians to edit the video which will go live, marketing materials have been redrafted to present a more dynamic image of the School and enhance the graduate profile, the Facebook group, even though only a temporary demo, had over 75 active members

within the first week, without being officially launched, pages of student testimonials will shortly be uploaded.

The alumni network, while still a work in progress, is currently taking shape on the basis of a survey of all SIS alumni, conducted in autumn 2013. As many of the students who participated in the project are now alumni themselves, they are keen to see this part of the project flourish, not least because it will be a way of keeping alive the spirit of community which the project fostered. Indeed, several have offered to work on developing the network, even though they are no longer in Trento.

It is perhaps this less tangible impact that is the project's greatest achievement, or rather the immediate effect it had on all stakeholders. This is evident in some of the comments made by academic staff on the day of the presentation: "Assolutamente rinfrancato […] dalle presentazioni"[16], the project "has achieved a miracle: transform potential complaints into constructive proposals" (see Riley, 2013, p. 6 for further comments).

Moreover, the project presentation triggered a series of further suggestions from all stakeholder groups. These suggestions regarded all aspects of academic life at the SIS, many of which are being implemented. Thus examples of good practice have inspired further examples.

8. The summer cycle song – hot but not heated discussions

Such was the enthusiasm kindled by the project, that even though officially over from a SPEAQ point of view, the group of international students was still willing to work through the summer. This next stage involved monitoring and evaluating the steps so far to then make any adaptations necessary in preparation for the new intake in September 2013. For example editing the FAQ page further, making the pages for the international website as clear as possible, drafting an email to the newly admitted students to welcome them and inform them of what to expect in September etc. were some of the improvements made to the original project. One might say that the quality cycle had become a virtuous cycle.

One initiative which had not yet been put into practice was an online student guide for international students, in particular an introduction to the Italian academic culture. The international students still saw this as an essential tool to ease the integration and enhance the learning experience of the next intake of students.

9. Sing for your supper – hot hard work rewarded

The final workshop took place at the author's house before the August holidays. Aware that this was the last opportunity to make a contribution to the further enhancement of the project, students worked one long hot afternoon, in a room with no air-conditioning for over four hours. To them be subjected to further overheating by having to cook their own supper on the barbecue! In true-team-building spirit, they rose to this final challenge, and even did the washing up.

16 "I feel reassured/heartened by today's presentations" (All comments originally Italian are left in their original form in the text and translated by the author in the footnotes).

While such detail is perhaps not the usual content of an academic paper, this anecdotal evidence has some importance. While I am not suggesting project co-ordinators and Quality Managers have to welcome stakeholders into their own home to serve the cause of Quality. However, the interpersonal development skills of students are part of their whole education, a part of education often overlooked in formal programmes.

Moreover, the very fact that students were willing to dedicate their time in the full heat of summer to improving the lot of the students who would follow in their footsteps is evidence, if not scientific proof, that when given the opportunity, students are willing to take quality into their own hands to develop and implement their own initiatives and make a contribution to the overall quality of the institution, becoming personally involved in a community of action – a virtuous circle is drawn. This would also challenge the more recent perception/representation of students as customers and educational institutions as service providers, and reinforces the idea of universities as learning communities, if not veritable hot houses of culture, intercultural exchange.

10. Learning to read the notes to sing the refrain – understanding the quality questions

While it is not necessary for students to understand the language of quality assurance, it is important that they be aware of the processes if they are to take on (some of the) responsibility for the quality of their own learning experience. Early on in the project the LANQUA quality model was presented to the students, as were the other projects in the SPEAQ partner institutions. The students were very interested in these other projects, in particular the ones in Finland (Räsänen 2013) which focused on the professional development of professors and redesigning the end of course Teaching Quality Assessment procedures due to TQA fatigue and a general dissatisfaction with the online format (Helmerson 2013). They were also interested in how even in educational contexts renowned for their excellence, there is still room for improvement and the quality cycle continues turning. The importance of raising awareness to quality issues in the whole student body is highlighted in the ESU Quest reports (ESU, 2012; 2013). This finding was confirmed in the Trento project.

A further analysis of the project can be made by making reference to the LANQUA quality model. At each stage the students tried to answer the questions in the cycle. A brief summary of their answers to the questions might provide a useful overview of the project. More importantly, for exploitation and extension purposes, this case study can also illustrate how the model, originally intended for language courses, can easily be adapted to any area of the HEA.

1. Planning: overview and process - What are we trying to do?
   a) Improve the information provided for international students through multiple communication channels, including social media; b) improve the image of the School; c) better define the graduate profile; d) create an alumni network
2. Purpose: objectives and outcomes – Why are we trying to do it?
   a) To ease the integration of international students into a different academic culture; b) & c) to attract students of the highest calibre in the first instance and to enhance the employability of graduates; d) to foster the idea of

a community, to act as a forum of advice for current students, not least regarding internship and employment possibilities.
3. Implementation: methods – How are we going to do it?
   SWOT analysis, questionnaires, discussions, debates leading to concrete deliverables.
4. Monitoring and evaluation: results and feedback – How will we know that it works?
   The reception of the concrete outcomes will be monitored through feedback from all stakeholders in forums and in further discussions and questionnaires. The fostering of a community spirit will be measured by the continued (or lack of) interest in the future of the project activities.
5. Adaptation: revision and modification – How will we be able to improve it?
   Further input from a new intake of students and input from faculty members will ensure new perspectives ensure the cycle will continue spinning.

The students were quick to realise that certain aspects of their academic life in Italy are more resistant to change than others, not least the sanctity of the professor's independence and autonomy. Therefore, other than recommend the introduction of teacher training for professors, in particular teacher training for the multicultural classroom, and request the introduction of further elective courses, the students focused more on support services and communication aspects of academic life. Teachers should also be subject to minimum requirements in English language on programmes where teaching is in English.

Apart from the opening hours, international students are generally happy with the service at The Welcome Office. However, it offers no support in course related matters and students are referred to the Student Office where often the personnel have limited English skills and even more limited time to explain such things. It is hoped the planned student online guide to studying in Trento will in some way obviate this problem. However, another student proposal was to offer a student tutoring/mentoring service similar to that provided for undergraduate freshers in the departments. A dedicated student tutor with good English language skills would save time for both students and administrative staff, and therefore be cost effective as well as enhancing quality.

11. Singing a new song of praise – feedback on the project

Given the nature and the aims of this project, which was not intended as scientific research as such, but rather a grass-roots initiative to put QA&E practices into action on the ground, the main discussion section of this paper will focus on the feedback provided by participants in the project. While representing a mere fraction of the feedback generated, and by no means selecting only the flattering comments, this feedback is essential to understand the change in mindset such a project can generate.

As a follow up to the project, the two working groups were asked to submit project reports. They were purposely not given specific instructions on how to structure these reports or to use the model. It was interesting to see, however, that most students adopted a Quality Question approach to the write up (Riley, 2013, Annex 8). They had almost automatically adopted, and adapted, the model for monitoring/reporting purposes.

At the end of the project, some interviews were conducted and questionnai-

res with open ended questions were submitted to the three main stakeholder groups in the aMEISing project: students, teachers, administrative staff. A different questionnaire, again with open-ended questions was submitted to all members of the Student-Teacher committee and the international student was interviewed. Sample responses from these questionnaires and interviews can be found in Annexes 9-12 of the project report (Riley, 2013).

While this is no scientific measurement of achieving the overarching aim of the project, namely to foster a quality culture (Blanco Ramirez, 2013), this method of data collection allowed an insight into the perceptions of the different actors. Nonetheless, a **reported** change in mindset, a change in awareness of both wider issues and/or a different perception of one's own role in quality, might be considered an indicator of achievement.

Indicative of the feedback from the survey on the role of the Student-Teacher Committee was the fact it provided a formal platform of discussion: "It is good to have a formal context to do this, so complaints are reasoned and mediated"[17]. It is a little early to comment on whether it has achieved a great deal but all members felt is was very promising: I feel very satisfied with the amount of things that have been accomplished so far and with the commitment of the SIS' staff in delivering such objectives."; "it is not possible to say if it has been efficient or not yet, but the intentions are good"; "It remains to see the outcomes (I think it is still early for a full-fledged judgment)".

There was some specific mention to the student voice being heard, even if this was not explicitly elicited in the questions, which highlights the fact that students want their voice to be heard **and** heeded: "I think the S-T Committee has been essential in ensuring that the student proposals are actually considered and not just acknowledged". Nonetheless, there was some belief that the scope of the Committee might be limited in its impact on certain aspects: "I think it will have a positive impact, although a limited one. The greatest role will be played by teachers in the Council of the School (and in some sense, this is right: it is their job to bear the responsibility for organising the course) and by the structural constraints that allow limited leeway for action." This last comment shows considerable understanding of the system and in acutely aware insight into the different roles of the stakeholders in QA&E: "The risk for students is to look at their own problems and propose irrational solutions, overlooking the general interest and future implications. So teachers should always mediate through their experience and foster dialogue and reasoning". In trying to explain this mature and reasoned analysis of QA&E processes, it might be expected that student representatives to come to the table with a greater awareness of these issues. However, in interviews the students reiterated the value of what they had learnt from an institutional point of view by being part of the process. They were then able to go back to the student body with reasoned answers and explanations. This highlights how both formal and informal QA&E mechanisms are both essential and can work in harmony.

The future success of the Committee, however, in their view, depends on the degree to which the students' role in the process is taken seriously: "the presence of a S-T Committee is already very promising because it shows that you care about what we think and what we need and I am sure this will bring improvements to our school".

17 All questions were answered in English and quotes are reported unedited, i.e. including language errors.

As for feedback on the aMEISing project, obviously the focus of comments depends very much on the actor involved. Administrative staff obviously highlighted the role of the institution, in particular regarding the difficulties encountered: "Far conciliare le esigenze effettive degli studenti con i tecnicismi vincolati della programmazione didattica; sono anche di ostacolo i lunghi tempi di attesa per veicolare le necessità agli uffici competenti e implementare le opportune azioni correttive"[18].

It is interesting to note the kind of language used by administrators, far more technical and detached, perhaps reflecting the way they experience Quality – as part of their duties rather than something they felt as being their own. Paradoxically, the administrators reported as one of the most valuable outcomes of the project from their point of view was the realisation of the importance that the **students** developed a feeling of belonging to the SIS: "la percezione che gli studenti hanno un senso di appartenenza alla SSI, si identificano con gli obbiettivi che essa vuole perseguire. È stato interessante cogliere come essi si siano interrogati su come raggiungere i risultati attesi nell'ambito delle condizioni attuali della struttura del programma e al contempo siano riusciti ad evidenziare la necessità di creare nuove condizioni operative"[19].

While not in the scope of this paper, this raises interesting questions on 'ownership' of quality and the realisation (or lack of) that **all** stakeholders, including administrators, are involved in Quality. In fact in an earlier stage of the project, the inclusion of administrators in workshops and focus groups was sometimes questioned by the academic staff, unused to actually discussing issues with administrators. As already stated, the SPEAQ perspective is inclusive of all stakeholders. Administrators are essential to the smooth functioning of any system, even more so when this system deals with the future generations.

The most valued aspect of the project from the administrators' point of view, however, was a new awareness of the students' perspective, in particular regarding communication channels: "Uscire dalla prospettiva UNITN troppo 'inside-oriented', cogliere l'importanza della efficacia comunicativa, individuare gli strumenti che la Scuola può adottare per venire incontro alle esigenze degli studenti, porsi come obbiettivo il far capire agli utenti cosa la Scuola offre per l'inserimento nel mondo del lavoro"[20]. As this was one of the main objectives the students had identified, at least in part, this increased awareness of those very administrators responsible for communication with the external world – the

18 "To reconcile the effective needs of the students with the technical restrictions of the teaching programme; there are also obstacles and long time scales (literally waiting times) in transmitting these needs to the appropriate offices and subsequently to implementing the remedial actions".
19 "Realising that the students feel they belong to the SIS (School of International Studies), they identify with the objectives the School aims to achieve. It was interesting to see how they asked themselves how to achieve the desired results in light of the current conditions with the rigid structure of the programme and at the same time how they managed to highlight the need to create new working conditions (educational environment)".
20 "[We need to] Depart from the UNITN (University of Trento) perspective which is too focused on itself, fully understand the importance of effective communication, identify the instruments the School can adopt to meet the students' needs, set ourselves the objective of presenting what the School offers current and prospective students in terms of job opportunities".

website – might be considered a major achievement, and one which is proving to be so.

Changing perspective to that of the academic staff (professors, lecturers, support teachers and tutors), even though there was a greater divergence of opinion among academic staff as to what the priorities are, we can see some overlap with administrators in the realisation of the importance of effective communication: "To involve all the School community in improving the way things are run, in particular information and communication and the School's image". Regarding the greatest obstacles to QA&E, there was unanimity in condemning the straightjacket effect of an increasingly centralised bureaucracy in a system which places no value on teaching and for some which does not provide for professional development.

As for what they considered the main value of the project, views ranged from: "the way students were positive and creative in their approach to the issues and prepared to dedicate their time and effort to improving the School" to comments on the way the project brought the stakeholders together: l'incontro che avete organizzato è stato veramente bello e stimolante, ho trovato l'interazione studenti-docenti al tempo stesso molto rispettosa dei ruoli reciproci e molto costruttiva"[21].

The great impact the project had on the academic staff, in particular concerning communication with the external world, had reverberations across the university reaching the highest levels: "da quanto ho capito il vostro lavoro ha fatto da apripista per una serie di riflessioni a livello centrale; [prorettore] è informato ed è rimasto molto colpito soprattutto dalla parte relativa alle testimonianze dei laureati"[22]. As reported earlier, students were invited to cooperate with the information office and technicians which engendered further motivation – yet another example of how such grass roots initiatives can set a virtuous quality cycle in motion.

Some academic staff welcomed students comments regarding teaching methods and approaches in the Italian context and the suggestion of the need for professional development of teachers[23], others were less receptive. Professors who had spent periods abroad tended to be more enlightened to the benefits of pedagogical training in student-focused teaching (e.g. Pan *et al 2012*, Postareff *et al* 2007). Moreover, one professor who would wholeheartedly welcome such pedagogical training, thought that if the opinions of international students on this issue were made more widely known, also through more formal mechanisms, then there was more likelihood of this becoming a reality. However, it is not only the less enlightened professors are sceptical about pedagogical training. Even though the international student on the Student-Teacher Committee was one of the most vociferous in debating this issue, many Italian students, used to the mo-

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21 "The meeting you organised was really great and very stimulating, I found the interaction between students and teachers at once very respectful of the respective roles and very constructive".

22 "As I have understood it your project has instigated a series of reflections at the central [office] level; [Pro-Rector] has learnt of the project and was very impressed, particularly by the student testimonials".

23 During a seminar at Trento in autumn 2013, Prof. Castagnaro of the ANVUR also voiced a desire for such courses to be introduced as a matter of course in all HE institutions in Italy.

re traditional (and less demanding) teacher-focused approach, were not fully in agreement[24], and thus the issue was not raised in the Committee[25].

Interestingly, some academic staff were alerted to the essential role of administrators in QA&E, not merely as executors of the rules and regulations imposed by the structure but as active contributors to the processes: "Involving the administrative staff more in the project would be effective, but obviously within the limits of the possible". The development of an awareness of the shared roles and responsibilities is another of the overarching aims of the SPEAQ project.

From the SPEAQ perspective, however, by far the most interesting comments from academic staff regarded the concept of a learning community spirit and the involvement of all stakeholders: "The whole project left a very positive feeling in everyone at the presentation. It made us all think that we can all contribute to help improve things". There was also recognition that fostering such a community can spring from small-scale initiatives: "A small-scale project like this working on issues that can be addressed relatively easily can help create the right atmosphere at the School and help give the School an identity".

As the students were at the heart of this project, it is to their feedback that we now turn our attention. As Coates illustrates in his model of student engagement (Coates, 2007) there are multiple levels of student engagement and the following comments would seem to support his claims. On an affective level, the greatest reaction was one of immense satisfaction and gratification: "the project has had a huge impact not only on our mates and professors but also outside the school. I am happy with the result, I think we all have done our best". Not least because their efforts were made known to the wider university community through the UNITN periodical and through the presentation of one of the students during a webinar held at the Department of Cognitive Science in November 2013[26].

As for a more tangible impact, students were very positive about the future of QA&E processes and the role their project had in bringing these to the fore: "I think the most important impact the project left was the echo of change, i.e. that in order to be more attractive and competitive at the international level, MEIS needs restructuring, and for this what is need is debate, discussion and evaluation from all stakeholders"[27]. In fact the need to discuss issues was a recurrent theme: "the fact that all stakeholders (i.e. students, professors, MEIS staff) got together to discuss, evaluate, and propose eventual changes for the MEIS' structure".

Regarding the actual deliverables, the students were on the whole happy with their efforts, but were aware of their own limitations as communications experts. Moreover, there was an awareness that small-scale projects have to fit into a wider perspective: "University communication professionals should check the content and see if is in line with the whole unitn communication project. The project then should be implemented and periodically updated".

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24 See O'Neill & McMahon (2005) for a discussion of students' and teachers' beliefs about teaching approach in HE.
25 The Italian students, not used to voicing their opinion on such matters, might also have been reluctant to raise this issue in a formal forum where their professors are present.
26 http://www.unitn.it/cogsci/evento/31967/qualita-della-didattica-universitaria-il-contributo-dellelearning
27 It is interesting to note that this was one of the main findings of the whole SPEAQ project with all stakeholders reporting that the various projects had provided an informal forum of discussion amongs all stakeholders. (Greere & Riley in print).

There were also some collateral benefits mentioned by both academic staff and the students themselves. Not least the way they had developed their communication and critical thinking skills during the project (cfr the Dublin descriptors for transversal and transferable learning outcomes): "The presentation itself was very professional and the some of the outcomes were very well thought out, in particular the video. The students were able to develop many different skills by participating in the project". One professor commented on how the project had helped students develop these skills and the added value this gave: "più riusciamo a rendere gli studenti capaci di 'vendersi' bene sul mercato, più loro avranno successo nel perseguire i loro obiettivi professionali"[28].

To a certain extent the project was also self-fulfilling in so far as the student's felt their own profile had been enhanced thanks to the project alongside that of the enhancement of the MEIS graduate profile viewed externally: "The project led to very good outcomes, but one should not consider it as a easy task: it aimed to modify the 'vitrine' of the school/MEIS. The reputation of the school - then, ours as well- will depend on it".

The project also provided a space for personal development and other interpersonal skills, which are essential for future employment: "I learned how a team should work, I saw which are the problems that arise during team working and how to find a solution all together. However, the most important thing I've learned is that when you put passion in your work, it makes the difference". Professors also noted this aspect: "soprattutto la parte relativa al lavoro in team: gli studenti mi sono sembrati molto affiatati e pronti ad interagire con professori e amministrativi in maniera costruttiva"[29]. These applied skills are precisely those transversal and transferable skills advocated in the Bologna Framework and exemplified in the Dublin descriptors.

Finally, and most importantly, as with the other stakeholder groups, the most valued aspect of the project was that of creating a sense of community: "In short, I think the project left this spirit of a community which gets together to discuss the best prospect for itself". This sense of community is so strong that students felt they were almost duty-bound to engage in such projects: "The most valuable aspect is the motivation behind the project, i.e., the willingness of giving something back to a school that has given us so much".

12. Singing in a community round – fostering a quality culture

As mentioned above, one of the most positive outcomes of the whole project was, as one student expressed it "QUOTE". This feeling has been voiced by all those involved in the project. A new intake of students and even several new faculty members with the start of the new academic year might have resulted in a slowing down of the rhythm of the quality cycle, or even stopping mid cycle. To a certain extent, the student teacher committee has ensured a degree of formal continuity, in particular as regards the monitoring and evaluation of the initiati-

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28 "The more we are able to help the students able to 'sell themselves' well on the job market, the greater success they will have to achieve their professional goals".
29 "particularly the team work aspect: the students seemed to get on very well together and ready to interact with professors and administrators in a constructive way".

ves undertaken. For the more informal mechanisms, thanks to the prominence given to the project on the School website – a link on the home page – current students have become aware of the project and have expressed an interest in its continuation. As already mentioned, recent graduates have volunteered to help run the alumni network.

The enthusiasm and interest of the student thus remains constant. The biggest change in attitude, instead, has come from some faculty members and also administrative and technical staff, and even the university hierarchy. The Rector's Delegate for Didactics contacted the project coordinator to have further information and after seeing some of the deliverables urged for the continuation of the project and instructed the information office to offer support in implementing the concrete actions.

At the SIS level, several of the main actors (degree coordinator, communications coordinator and careers guidance coordinator) have all renewed their commitment in terms of time and energy and not just lip-service, to assuring and enhancing all aspects of life at the School as well as instigating change. The reform of the MEIS is currently underway, and much greater notice is being taken of the students' voice than in previous reforms. This may be due to the external QA mechanisms recently introduced by ANVUR, based on the best practices in many European countries. However, in part, I am convinced it is thanks to the effect of the project on the faculty. In fact, one thing this project has confirmed, is that grass roots initiatives often have a greater impact on promoting quality and fostering a quality culture than external mechanisms imposed from above (EUA, 2006) This was a common finding in all the SPEAQ partner projects. Small, focused initiatives are able to engage actors more effectively, which had a positive washback effect on the local and even wider context. Therefore, while I agree with Henard and Roseveare's (2012, p. 3) call for collaboration and for ways "to address tensions between innovators and those reluctant to change". However, I would challenge their claim that this requires "leadership" if the aim is "developing institutions as effective learning communities where excellent pedagogical practices are developed and shared". Good practice on the whole is not only imposed from above, but rather developed with the full cooperation between stakeholders at all levels of the institution, all within a sound policy framework (Harrison & Marzetti, 2013). In other words, dialogue between policy and practice is needed and the responsibility for quality shared by all (academics, students, administrators, quality managers and quality agencies). Quality is thus a two way street – top down process facilitate and subsequently incorporate the outcomes and best practices of bottom up initiatives (cfr Telford & Musson, 2005). Only then can a quality community be developed and sustained.

13. World Music – where international and national voices meet

In answer to the question posed in the title, then the resounding answer must be yes. Over the academic year, the willingness of international students to contribute to improving the MEIS experience was admirable. The fact that this enthusiasm and interest spread to the local student community to then reach out to the whole school can only be music to the ears of those involved in promoting QA&E at Trento.

Conclusion

This project spawned many positive tangible outcomes, but perhaps the most positive outcome of all was that of raising awareness to QA&E envisaged as a shared, collaborative effort among all stakeholders which in turn fostered a feeling of learning community, as reported in the follow up questionnaires. The project's dual focus of both formal and informal mechanisms, also showed how both external and internal, bottom-up and top-down processes operating in concert and with stakeholders in cooperation (codecision-makers) can contribute to enhancing the quality of all aspects of university life. More specifically concerning the international student's voice, engagement, empowerment and ownership of Quality (Greere and Riley in press) by international students can thus be said to be functional to maintaining the rhythm of a virtuous quality cycle and thus contribute to the overall enhancement of a quality culture in a HE context.

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