

## **Student feedback channels in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees: Insights for international joint programmes**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the status of student feedback channels and the role of student representatives in the quality assurance and enhancement of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) programmes. It provides an analysis of 1941 open-ended survey responses, covering 87 EMJMD programmes and involving respondents of 129 nationalities. The findings indicate that students and alumni feel that they should be involved in shaping key aspects of their programmes. The results suggest that organisational culture, national policies and regulations bear little relevance to students, as their needs transcend borders and contexts. The study suggests that further harmonisation in internal quality assurance processes would be welcomed by students as they recognise good practice in eliciting student feedback. The empirical findings can be useful in providing policy makers and researchers with a snapshot of prevailing issues in student engagement in quality assurance.

**Key words:** Student feedback, student engagement, quality assurance, Erasmus Mundus, international joint programmes

### **Introduction**

This article aims to explore the status of student feedback channels and role of student representatives in the quality assurance and enhancement of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) programmes. The paper is expected to contribute to better understanding the role of student representatives in shaping overall study experiences and share suggestions on how to improve student feedback channels. The empirical analysis is based on a large volume of qualitative data collected through the Course Quality Student Survey, administered by the Course Quality Advisory Board, an independent advisory body that operates on a voluntary basis as part of the Erasmus Mundus Student and Alumni Association.

Since its establishment in 2013, the Course Quality Advisory Board's most comprehensive and systematic initiative on quality assurance has been the Course Quality Student Survey. The inception and design of the survey was rooted in the complexity of the EMJMD student experience and has been driven by two distinct factors: the perceived issues around quality across joint degree programmes and the general underrepresentation of students in the systemic evaluation of EMJMD programmes. While some attempts have been made to collect students' feedback at the European level, for example the European Student Union survey on student guidance at universities and the QUEST project, European-level student surveys that captures student feedback on wide-ranging issues such as curriculum, teaching quality and feedback channels are lacking. An absence of comprehensive empirical data on students' perception of their role in quality assurance in current student feedback channels used across the EMJMD programmes required the Course Quality

Advisory Board to conduct a series of Course Quality Student Surveys. Based on experience from three waves of surveys, the Course Quality Student Surveys, thus far, have proved to be useful tools that enable the collection of comprehensive information on student experiences on EMJMD programmes. In their analysis of the Course Quality Advisory Board survey instruments, Balyasin, Carvalho and Mihut (2016, p. 111) argued that Course Quality Student Surveys have merits in addressing the lack of empirical studies that explore the challenges faced by students attending several institutions operating within different higher education systems as part of the same degree programme.

Literature on transnational higher education indicates that programmes that involve two or more institutions located in different countries may face challenges in relation to differences in culture and institutional character (Hitt & Pisano, 2003), complicated organisational identity (Amaral *et al.*, 2016) and asymmetry of interest between parties involved (Cheung, 2006). Furthermore, Owens and Lane (2014) point to the challenges of addressing the needs of and establishing robust coordination among various key stakeholders involved in transnational higher education programmes. The task of balancing the interests, often competing ones, of stakeholders, as noted by Healey (2016), also present additional challenge to higher education institutions not least identifying and engaging stakeholders on academic and managerial aspects of programmes.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, EMJMD programmes face additional obstacles due to their unique nature when compared to other types of international joint programmes. Most students enrolled in EMJMD programmes, within a period of two years, attend their studies at three to four higher education institutions located in different countries and additionally conduct an internship at an organisation, usually in yet another country. The uniqueness of such programmes can be seen as rooted in the rather complex nature and diversity of actors involved (that is, diversity of higher education institutions within the host consortium and associate partners that serve as destinations for internships and practical learning periods), its signature intensive mobility scheme, and the special kind of demand this creates for robust communication, feedback and coordination among the consortium of universities and between students and universities. These issues, combined with the short-term stay of students at each consortium member institution, underscore the role of active student engagement approaches and the sense of urgency with which improvements need to be undertaken before students depart to their next destination.

### **Student engagement in quality assurance: policy context**

Quality assurance in higher education has been used to ‘establish comparable criteria and methodologies in relation to HE quality’ (Hsieh & Huisman, 2017). In Europe, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (2015) requires higher education institutions to undertake regular monitoring of student expectations and satisfaction in relation to their study experiences. Many existing national and supranational quality assurance frameworks include a set of requirements related to student participation in quality assurance of programmes that higher education providers must meet (TQSA, 2017; NWCCU, 2018; ESG, 2015). In the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, national student surveys provide stakeholders such as national policy makers, funding agencies, senior management and students with comparable data on various aspects of higher education provision and serves to gauge students’ overall satisfaction with their study experience. Furthermore, the National Student Survey, administered in the United Kingdom, includes a section dedicated to ‘student voice’. The related scores signal students’ level of satisfaction with the opportunities provided to them to quality assure and enhance their study experience. This type of survey can be seen as a tool for the monitoring of institutional compliance with requirements related to student engagement in quality assurance as perceived by students.

In the wider European context, quality assurance has been used as an instrument for harmonising practices across institutions (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011), for instance in the case of international joint educational programmes such as EMJMD programmes. EMJMDs are international programmes jointly managed by an international consortia of higher education institutions across Europe and a few other partner countries of the world.

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the ESG was adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 and have provided an umbrella quality assurance framework for EMJMD programmes. The guidelines state that programmes must be designed by involving students and other stakeholders and institutions must undertake regular monitoring of student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to their programme (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher education (ENQA), 2015). While the ESG enabled the development of an integrated approach to quality, assuring the quality of international joint programmes continues to be a challenge (Kelo *et al.*, 2018).

Some instruments have been implemented to encourage the establishment of mechanisms that elicit student engagement at system and institutional levels. For instance, applications of EMJMD programmes for European Commission funding require consortium members to describe in detail the ‘jointness’ of their design, structure and overall approach for proposed programmes. Consortium members who apply for funding are also required to provide integrated plans for the quality assurance of programmes.

In 2015, the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* was adopted by 50 countries in the EHEA. The approach was meant to enable members of consortia to apply one single joint programme accreditation that would be recognised by other countries in the EHEA without the need to apply additional national criteria. The European Approach seeks to ease requirements for joint programmes by reducing multiple national accreditations. However, a recent survey conducted by the ‘Facilitating implementation of the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (ImpEA)’ project confirmed that there has been little change in quality assurance systems since the adoption of the agreement. Data from the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), to date, showed that ‘thirty countries out of the 48 EHEA countries still did not offer higher education institutions the possibility to use the European Approach’ (Kelo *et al.*, 2018, p. 10) and continued to require joint programmes to meet their respective national external quality assurance regulations. A report of Outcomes Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes also found a disappointing progress; only few countries were found to have acted on the agreement and many countries still have not made changes to their national legislations that would allow the implementation of the European Approach (Becker, 2017). This indicates that not enough has been done to implement the European Approach.

### **Conceptual and theoretical views on student engagement in quality assurance**

Student engagement is a vague concept. There has been a lack of unified conceptualisation of student engagement and what it focuses on (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). The concept has lacked structured application in academic and policy discussions (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Student engagement and student involvement are often used interchangeably, although some argue that the two terms convey varying scope of student participation and depth of perceived impacts (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011; Elassy, 2013).

According to the *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009* (Rauhvargers *et al.*, 2009, p. 60), the participation of students in quality assurance can take place at five main 'levels': in the governance of national bodies for quality assurance; in external review of higher education institutions or programmes (as members in panel of experts, or as observers in panel of experts, or at a decision-making capacity); in consultation during external reviews; in internal quality assurance processes; and in preparation of self-assessment reports. Similarly, through a review of monitoring reports of the Bologna Process, Palomares (2012) suggested a model for conceptualising the involvement of students in quality assurance, which addresses involvement at internal or institutional level, external level and governance of quality assurance agencies level. Moreover, Elassy (2013) proposed a model for analysing different extents of formal student involvement in quality assurance process, which consist of three main categories: involvement in responding to questionnaires related to quality assurance issues; involvement in quality assurance committees; and involvement in direct quality assurance procedures. The empirical analysis of this paper focuses on student engagement in direct quality assurance processes at institutional level.

The participation of students in internal and external quality assessment processes is vital for transforming learning environments and enhancing overall study experiences; and this is evident in the increasing tendency to view students as partners in quality assessment processes (Shah *et al.*, 2014). Student engagement is perceived to constitute an integral element of quality assurance processes at system and institutional levels. Feedback systems comprising various mechanisms provide a useful platform through which higher education institutions can solicit the participation, involvement and engagement of students on issues related to quality of teaching and learning and overall institutional management. The practice of collecting student feedback currently constitutes an element of the internal and external quality assurance processes in several higher education systems.

The active involvement of students in institutional quality assurance processes can provide several benefits. In her theoretical analysis, Elassy (2013) suggested that student involvement can aid students in the development of their communication, analytical and leadership skills and increase their awareness about their institutions. Further, student involvement supports quality assurance processes through informing institutions and their quality assurance teams about the perspectives of students, providing validity, credibility and legitimacy to quality review processes and information about quality gathered from other sources, and contributing to the enhancement of the overall quality of higher education institutions. Coates (2005) emphasised that the value of student engagement for quality assurance lies in the essential information it provides on student learning, its capacity to support universities in managing student learning and the increased attention it brings to students and their learning. A systematic utilisation of qualitative feedback from students can serve as an effective indicator for institutional performance and assists in enhancing student experience (Grebennikova & Shah, 2013). Arguably, quality management frameworks implemented in genuine cooperation and coproduction with students can lead to increased institutional responsiveness to student needs, better performance in achieving learning outcomes and enhanced quality of teaching and learning (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011).

There are different views on the role and degree of student engagement. The degrees of student engagement include consultation, partnership and leadership; each representing varying level of perceived impacts of a given student engagement activity in relation to a specific object of engagement (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Accordingly, student engagement approaches and policies, for instance in quality assurance, may lead to no or small-scale amendments to a quality issue; contribute to bringing about changes to a quality problem at hand through collaborative engagement with academic staff and institutions; or proactively help create new mechanisms that serve to

prevent quality standards from declining and improve the quality of teaching and learning. In broader context, student engagement approaches may see students assuming roles as evaluators, participants, partners, co-creators, experts and change agents (Kay *et al.*, 2010).

Student engagement may focus on promoting the participation of the student body through student representatives or engaging ordinary students (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Consistent with such perspective, Little and Williams (2010) suggested that structures established to facilitate formal student engagement in quality assurance basically comprise two main components namely, student representation systems and student feedback questionnaires. In student representation, the collective views of diverse groups of students are taken forward through elected representatives and provide inputs for decision making, whereas formal and informal feedback channels such as feedback surveys and other instruments provide opportunities for individual students to convey their opinion on the quality of teaching and learning and overall study experiences. This article provides empirical insights into both forms of student engagements, by taking the case of EMJMD programmes, through a discussion of qualitative survey data that maps the practices of addressing academic and management issues through student representatives and explores status of feedback channels set up at universities to capture the engagement of individual students.

Beyond teaching and learning aspects, student engagement can play a key role in programme management and governance of universities (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Planas *et al.*, 2013; Carey, 2013, 2018; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Student engagement activities can enhance the quality of teaching and learning and institutional decision making (Coates, 2005; Healey *et al.*, 2014; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Student engagement in quality assurance processes has prominent implications for the relationship between students and higher education institutions. Such relationships can take forms that may range from a consumer-based to a transformation-based cooperation between students and their universities (Gvaramadze, 2011). A recent study by Carey (2018) shows the importance of the roles and needs of institutions in shaping the dynamics of student engagement. In a broader sense, the value of student engagement can be seen from a functional perspective of how it benefits higher education institutions, developmental perspective of its benefits to students and social perspective of its benefits to society (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p. 70).

### ***Critiques and challenges of student engagement***

Although academic and policy discussions on student engagement largely regard it a desirable aspect, it has its criticisms. In their analysis of the literature, Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) identified six major critiques of student engagement approach and policy, which point to its problematic emphasis on assessing performance of student learning, tendency for its use by higher education institutions for marketisation purposes, biases that can disregard the intellectual maturity and independence of students, potential to serve as an instrument for surveillance and monitoring of students, emphasis on game-like approaches to student learning and tendency to regard student engagement activities that deviate from preferred expectations set by higher education institutions as oppositions. In addition, Klemencic (2017) criticised the conceptual underpinnings of student engagement that fail to address the autonomy and self-regulation of students, which are argued to be crucial for the development of student-centred learning, and hence calls for a shift to student agency in order to promote the capabilities of students for participating in shaping their learning environment and improving quality of learning. In this case, student agency is suggested as an alternative conceptual and theoretical construct to student engagement. Such emerging critical views seem to recognise the perceived emphasis of student engagement policies on instilling obedience and conformity in student learning as their key criticism.

Another conceptual and theoretical study suggested that current student engagement approaches lack a holistic perspective to student engagement, due to their overemphasis on behavioural dimensions and subsequent neglect of cognitive and emotional elements of engagement, which reinforces utilitarian and consumerist views (Milburn-Shaw & Walker, 2017). Excessive emphasis on the conceptions of students as consumers may limit the scope and depth of student engagement (Kay *et al.*, 2010; Little & Williams, 2010; Carey, 2018), unless supported with the approach of students as partners and co-producers in a platform that facilitates transformative engagement. This entails the need to depart from the prevalent tendency of viewing students more as customers and less as co-producers and active members of learning environment (Little & Williams, 2010).

The arguments for and against student representation in university governance may be linked to theoretical conceptions of students and their roles (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Accordingly, a variety of existing perspectives such as the consumerist, politically realist, consequentialist, and communitarian and democratic notions of students come with inherent concerns in relation to their philosophical justifications and practical implications (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). In practice, securing the active involvement of students in quality assurance may not always be possible due to: the tendency to consider students as less than peers and not competent enough to serve on a panel of experts; obstacles that arise from legislations and formal requirements; and the challenges for higher education institutions to motivate and convince students to actively participate in quality assurance process and shaping their study experience (Elassy, 2013). This indicates that fully engaging students in the quality assurance process may require further efforts on the part of institutions. In their study of student participation in the governance of the University of Girona, Planas *et al.* (2013) indicated that low level of student participation can be explained by weak sense of belongingness to one's institutions, inadequate awareness and ignorance of the role of student participation, gaps in communication, lack of time and rigid structures and functioning of university governance bodies. In addition, it is also found that role ambiguity and role conflict among student representatives and reliance on the willingness of academic staff and university management to engage in open and constructive dialogue with students present a challenge to student engagement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Hierarchical power structures in higher education institutions may limit the nature and degree of student engagement in decision making (Carey, 2018).

Several factors related to students; their teaching and learning experiences and institutional characteristics may also influence the extent of student engagement. It is important to take into account broad academic issues and interaction between students and staff to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of student engagement. Student demographics may also influence the nature of student engagement experience (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018) and hence there is a need for student engagement structures to accommodate the increasing diversity in the student population and provide sufficient platforms that support dialogue between heterogeneous views on what is a desirable student experience (Shah *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, a recent study by Carey (2018) suggested that institutional culture, policies and processes may also affect student engagement. In general, a complex set of individual, social and cultural factors may shape student engagement (Carey, 2013).

### **Approaches to data collection and analysis**

The study analyses data collected from two annual online surveys that were sent to students and alumni of EMJMD programmes. These surveys were designed, distributed and analysed by members of the Course Quality Advisory Board of the Erasmus Mundus Association. The data collection took place in the summers of 2015 and 2016. The overall objective of the surveys was to assess the quality of overall student support services offered by consortium of universities and the

reflections of students on their Erasmus Mundus experience covering various issues such as student feedback channels, teaching and learning, overall academic satisfaction, supervision, internship, personal and professional development. After careful consideration of various data-collection instruments, the CQAB decided to employ a survey method due to its relative advantage for capturing the perspective of a large number of students and alumni on a wide range of issues related to student experience in EMJMDs, using a combination of closed and open-ended questions.

This article only focuses on a small section of the surveys that address the issue of student representation and student feedback channels. The article analyses responses received to two open-ended questions.

- What do you think is the most important issues student representatives should address?
- What recommendations would you give to build and improve student feedback channels at the university?

These questions were asked three or four times separately, in order to capture the experience of students in each member university of a given consortium they attended, depending on the mobility path designed for each EMJMD programme. By asking open-ended questions, the questionnaire enabled respondents to address the most important issues to them, without imposing a framework that could constrain their thinking process.

Regarding the demographic profile of respondents, the ratio of male (50.8%) and female (49.1%) participants was almost equal. Upon completing the survey questionnaire, 38% of respondents to the question on student representation and 67% to the question on student feedback channels were still attending courses while the rest had already graduated.

A qualitative inductive analysis was carried out, as described in Thomas (2011). While preparing the data for analysis, the relevant and irrelevant responses were sorted. Responses that were complete, clearly understandable and answered the questions that were asked were marked as responses that were relevant to the data analysis. The remaining responses that did not meet these criteria were discarded from the data analysis. The relevant responses to the two open-ended questions were used as the raw data from which inductively the analysts developed the main codes that later served as themes around which the data analysis was structured. To validate these codes, data analysts first worked individually and later in pairs cross-referencing each code. Fellow qualitative data analysts at the Course Quality Advisory Board were enlisted to settle differences where there was contradiction in individual coding of specific open-ended responses. This was followed by filtering each code to map its prevalence. The final analysis focused on the most significant codes.

## **Result and discussion**

### ***The role of student representatives***

In comparison to other surveys, which ask students to reflect on a list of predefined areas of their studies, this open-ended question sought to explore the areas that were the most relevant to students. Such an approach was invaluable in engaging with the disposition of students with regard to themselves as active participants in shaping their overall learning experience. The question related to issues student representatives should address received a total of 1259 responses from which 66.5% (838) relevant responses were analysed. The results of the analysis indicate that current students and alumni felt that they should be, through their representatives, involved in matters relating to the quality assurance, curriculum development and management of their programmes.

*Quality assurance of programmes.* This was the most prominent code that grouped issues related to the quality assurance of programmes. Students felt that they had a central role to play in the quality assurance of their programmes. A large proportion of respondents wanted student representatives to better address the issue of quality and support their programmes to assure high academic standards. Students wanted their representatives to serve as a link between them and the consortium of universities, and to facilitate the flow of feedback from students was seen as a vital input for improving the quality of courses and students' study experiences. As one respondent noted, 'Student representatives should be the link between students and course coordinators and the EC'.

The respondents stated that student representatives needed to actively work to safeguard the interests of students in academic and management processes. They wanted representatives to deal with, for instance, quality of teaching, settling 'disagreements' between students and teachers, improving the structure of courses, ensuring transparency and consistency in assessment, and to be the driving force which ensures that students' voices are 'not merely' heard but that the professors and the consortium of universities 'do something about it' and 'solve the relevant problems'. The respondents were keen to point out the prime role student representatives had in supporting internal quality assurance processes at course and programme level. As a respondent noted,

Lack of communication between the institutions is a huge problem which negatively impacts students. student concerns are often overlooked or ignored, which becomes frustrating and seems unprofessional.

These comments make a case for seeking genuine cooperation and coproduction with students to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2011). It calls on higher education institutions to orient their perspectives beyond narrow consumerist views on students and recognise the crucial roles they can play in the quality assurance and enhancement of programmes.

*Curriculum.* The second most important issue for students was curriculum. Respondents of the survey suggested that student representatives should actively engage in addressing problems and gaps in programme curricula, in the words of one of the respondents:

The course representatives should oversee the logical course contents that are relevant and the practical case studies that are interesting for the program. There should be a field study trip to the best practice of the development model.

An example of curriculum-related issue that some of the respondents wanted student representatives to raise was the lack of practically focused teaching and learning on their programme. The respondents expressed their wish for student representatives to be at the forefront of advocating students' demand for more internship opportunities and closer links with industries. Another issue that frequently emerged in the responses was the need for student representatives to actively engage in improving the content and structure of courses, competences and skills incorporated into the curriculum, level of workload, assessment methods and programme schedule. The analysis indicates that students and alumni are interested in many aspects of programme curricula and approaches to learning and wished to be consulted on these matters as seen by the range of topics students were concerned about, for example, amount of workload, professor–student interaction and adequacy of practical learning sessions.

*Programme management.* The respondents also highlighted the importance of the student body being able to report issues related to administration and the management of programmes. An overarching notion was that students saw their representatives as instruments to ensure appropriate coordination and consistency of practices between universities within consortia.



Survey participants wanted to see representatives pushing for more standardisation across universities, address the lack of organisation, integration and communication of information between host universities especially with the students. Some of the key issues related to programme management, where respondents maintained that input from students was needed, include improving the accuracy, timeliness and accessibility of information necessary to properly conduct their studies and actively participate in programme administration; ensuring consistency in modules and ‘compatibility of universities’ within consortia; and addressing differences in ‘teaching cultures’ between universities. As highlighted earlier in this paper, it has been recognised that beyond teaching and learning aspects, student engagement can play a key role in programme management and governance of universities (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Planas *et al.*, 2013; Carey, 2013, 2018; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Indeed, the fact that students and alumni are aware of programme management issues and see them as key to integration and standardisation of practices, which they view would improve their study experience, suggests that students are interested in having active involvement in programme management.

The need for universities tasked with coordinating programmes to play a more active roles in ensuring improved communication between universities within consortia also emerged as a key issue that needed to be addressed by student representatives. Many students felt that student representatives should also address issues related to support with challenges that arise from intensive mobility such as adaptation to local culture and integration with local students and the emotional issues. One participant felt that the role of student representatives was ‘Supporting students who suffer emotionally from entering the dysfunctional environment of a lot of the universities in the programme’.

Furthermore, some respondents suggested that student representatives need to urge consortium of universities to provide more support with regard to career and professional development of students and alumni. The respondents were particularly keen on their student representatives conveying the demand of students for the consortium of universities to arrange for more assistance in relation to, for instance, the ‘development of the network with future potential employers, in order to eventually improve job placement services’, and the ‘inclusion of an internship programme with companies facilitated by the programme coordinators. This will help the students to get a job when they graduate’, career planning, preparation for pursuing further studies and, generally speaking, building academic and professional networks.

The broad range of issues covered above indicates that students feel that their feedback, taken forward by their programme representatives, should shape overall aspects of their study experience. Alongside questions of identity and roles of students, other challenges associated with engaging students in quality processes, raised in the theoretical discussion of this paper, could be addressed by creating an open dialogue with students and alumni.

### ***Improving student feedback channels at universities within consortiums***

The question that asked for the recommendations of respondents on how to build or further improve student feedback mechanisms received a total of 1725 responses, from which 64% (1103) relevant responses were analysed.

The surveys revealed that the majority of the EMJMD programmes had some form of mechanism through which feedback from students and alumni were gathered, although many of these were viewed to be weak, while students reported that a sizeable number of programmes have not put in

place any feedback channels. The results indicate that existing feedback practices mainly suffer from partiality, lack of professionalism and negative attitude from some professors and members of consortia, inadequate awareness of the significance of reaching out to students, breach of confidentiality, narrow scope, inflexibility, communication issues, poor coordination between universities within consortia, lack of openness to receive feedbacks, lack of implementation of feedback and lack of transparency of the overall reporting systems. When asked how feedback mechanisms could be improved the overwhelming majority of students and alumni suggested that universities should improve their feedback practices by putting in place formal feedback mechanisms.

*Nature of feedback channels.* The first most common issue that respondents suggested needed to be improved was matters related to the nature of feedback mechanisms, both from students to universities and from universities to students. Respondents suggested utilising diverse modes of communication channels including face-to-face discussions, questionnaires, suggestion boxes, and student panels, oral and written, formal and informal, individual and group discussions, online surveys, blogs, emails, social media, programme websites and online chat room. A considerable number of respondents expressed their wish to have consortia of universities install formal channels, through which students could easily give feedback and suggestions on academic, administrative and a range of other issues. They also indicated the need for feedback channels which capture every aspect of programmes, for more opportunities to get involved in various issues pertaining to the management of programmes. Respondents displayed a distinct preference towards comprehensive feedback channels that incorporated all parties involved in the EMJMD programmes and captured a broad range of matters related to courses, students, teachers, administrative staff, university services, management of consortia and various aspects of each semester and the programme as a whole. The role of student representatives in providing feedback was duly recognised by respondents and some also emphasised the need to pay more attention to the format and ease of use of feedback channels.

*Feedback on assessment.* The second most common issue was that respondents highlighted the need for timely, thorough and constructive feedback from professors upon evaluating students' work. The responses clearly indicated that, in many cases, students did not receive any feedback besides a quantitative grade. Some respondents voiced their dissatisfaction with the quality of feedback on assessment. For instance, a respondent stated, 'feedback on student academic performance was very poor with the exception of very few academic staff, as many do not send grades with constructive feedback'. The need for more detailed qualitative information on their academic performance and progress in learning, and the absence of teachers' recommendations for improvement was reiterated. Another respondent expressed dissatisfaction with teachers who give 'generic and superficial feedback without stating individual strengths, weaknesses and progress needed' and hence called for more concrete and analytical comments. Respondents made it clear that they would value having the opportunity to have open discussions with professors on individual performance and progression towards learning outcomes. These respondents also expressed their desire for consistent and transparent grading systems.

*Timeliness of feedback.* Third, the survey responses focused on the timeliness of feedback. Although a uniform trend could not be identified from the suggestions of respondents on what is the best time to collect feedback from students, the analysis of the responses indicated the need for a systematic schedule for feedback collection. For instance, one respondent stated:

although there is a formal meeting once in a while with our programme coordinator, but still I feel there should be some channel for periodic feedback from students because there is no point in giving feedback at the only the end of the semester.

What was evident from this was the preference for a continuous flow of communication. The growing concern of students for a speedy implementation of feedback could be associated with their usually short duration of stay at each university within a consortium and their intensive mobility structure. In general, respondents clearly reiterated the need to have feedback collected in time so that students could see what improvements have been made before they departed and some respondents suggested that a designated person should be made responsible for coordinating consortium-level or institutional response to student feedback.

*Feedback implementation.* A significant proportion of respondents raised having issues with their suggestions not being taken into account. Some respondents stated, for instance, that they had enough opportunities to provide feedback but were dissatisfied with the lack of changes made. Respondents expected the course evaluations they submitted to result in significant improvements in study conditions. However, the analysis of responses suggests that in some EMJMD programmes inadequate efforts were made to address issues that were raised repeatedly. Respondents stated, for instance, ‘we had enough opportunities for feedback but few changes were made’, ‘it seems like the course evaluations are just filled in and nobody really cares about what they say’ and ‘feedback was consistently the same from all students and there were no comments or interest from the university in addressing it.’

Furthermore, the responses also indicated that this problem could be exacerbated by perceived constraints in communication between students and universities and the lack of commitment and institutional will on the part of universities to implement suggestions. One respondent described this situation as follows:

The first coordinating university should welcome students’ feedback, in any subject, instead of ignoring them. I am from the first generation of the programme, and all good and bad things bumped us, we might provide good inputs for improvement if someone was willing to listen!

Several respondents suggested that promptly communicating the feedback received from students to concerned bodies could help facilitate the implementation process. In order to close the feedback loop and make the process more transparent, it was suggested that results from previous evaluations should be disclosed and actions taken to address concerns should be published and disseminated. According to these respondents, doing so necessitates the currently mainly rigid organisational systems to give way to flexibility, which was reported to be a crucial ingredient for integrating constructive feedbacks received from students and alumni. In some cases, respondents also reported frustration with the lack of staff professionalism, where students who voiced criticism during feedback discussions were believed to have been targeted afterwards and felt they were treated unfairly by those they criticised.

*Other issues related to feedback.* Additional issues highlighted by respondents were the need for raising awareness of the importance of feedback from students amongst university staff, the need for improving communication and coordination within and among universities within consortia and building feedback channels that safeguard confidentiality and anonymity of students and promote honest responses. For example, one respondent noted that coordination and communication is key for EMJMD programmes,

It is complex.. there were many situations where one university had to rely on the joint decision of all four universities to take decisions. At the same time, there were also many communication gaps between the four of them on what is required, when and how, as the programme is so intertwined.

Moreover, respondents called for academic and administrative staff at universities within consortia to be more available to provide support, more open to feedback and willing to discuss feedback with students. For example, a respondent said: ‘the director of our course avoids us when he knows that we are not glad with the course’, and another suggested ‘we need programme coordinators who are actually open and willing to dialogue with students and really think about recommendations provided by students’. Many of the respondents advised consortium of universities to reach out to students and pay attention to their concerns. Closing the distance between students and staff and simplifying bureaucratic and hierarchical procedures was seen as instrumental in enhancing communication. Another important suggestion given by respondents was the need to assign English speaking personnel in charge of collecting student feedback. It was also suggested that the diverse academic cultures of universities within a consortium may influence the form of feedback channel.

## **Conclusion and implications of findings**

The article revealed useful insights into student feedback channels and the role of student representatives in the quality assurance and enhancement in context of joint international programmes. The findings show that students and alumni see themselves as important stakeholders who should have a say in all aspect of their programmes, including curriculum, programme management, quality assurance and issues affecting their employability. Feedback channels in EMJMD programmes have great importance and the results from the survey provide crucial information on how to improve existing student feedback channels. The findings of the surveys provide key principles on which any feedback framework should be built if it is to facilitate the active participation of students in all aspects of their programme and deepen the partnership between students and universities. Students viewed the diversity of feedback channels, periodic collection of feedback and its timely implementation to be fundamental. It also became clear that students believed that formal and comprehensive feedback channels would ensure that their voices would be heard while they felt that informal and selective channels might be easier to ignore. The results highlight the importance of organisational culture that promotes openness and encourages universities to view students as partners. The findings of the surveys suggest that communication and coordination between universities within consortia of international joint programmes can enhance the creation of a conducive environment for the development of effective feedback channels.

The empirical findings presented in this article can be useful in providing policy makers and researchers with a snapshot of prevailing issues in student engagement in the context of international joint programmes. The multi-institutional and multi-geographic nature of the EMJMD programmes can provide additional perspectives beyond the experiences of traditional students attending a single institution throughout the period of study.

The findings support the need for increased harmonisation in quality assurance processes with regard to the role of students in shaping their study experiences and provide qualitative data on multifaceted improvements in feedback channels that students in EMJMD programmes, and other international joint programmes, would welcome. Indeed, a key point to take away from the findings of the study is that student interest and demand was mostly not context-specific. Students from 129 nationalities clearly share common concerns and expect their voices to be heard. While institutional and national contexts might dictate the nature of the feedback channels, they must not be seen as a barrier to engaging students in quality assurance and decision-making processes. It is recognised that EMJMD programmes provide a unique opportunity for students to experience different academic cultures and higher education systems by enabling them to study in three-to-five countries while attending courses and internships as part of their master’s degree. Although the analysis shows that students and alumni are fully aware of the challenges that higher education institutions

face, it also suggests that they believe they should be involved in all aspects of programme management through appropriate feedback mechanism and active student representation regardless of the academic and cultural context.

The notion of students having unified needs and expectations poses a challenge to consortia of higher education institutions, as differences in academic cultures mean dissimilar and, at times, inconsistent institutional responses. The growing demand, as suggested by the findings of the surveys, for improved student representation in programme management and robust quality assurance systems that employ effective feedback channels may characterise a transforming relationship between higher education providers and students.

As mentioned in the conceptual and theoretical discussion, the findings of this study suggest that engaging students in quality assurance can be challenging to universities, one of the challenges being the extent to which the expectations of students can be viewed as useful and practical. Acting on student feedback may require universities to make significant changes to established methods of operation. In a recent theoretical study, Carey (2018) indicated that student engagement may lead to unwanted conversations, bring unpredictability in higher education institutions and compromise the role and authority of staff over student learning. Further, excessive student-centred practices require considerable degree of flexibility and risk taking on the part of universities. Another issue is whether universities have the necessary capacity to respond to these needs. In spite of capacity constraints, commitment to developing institutional mechanisms that facilitates systematic engagement of students in quality assurance of teaching and learning and university management can be beneficial to universities in the long run. These and other issues have implications for how to carefully manage the expectations of students, for instance, by providing up-to-date and accurate information about study programmes, as neglecting student opinion can deprive higher education institutions of an invaluable input for improving their functions.

The article suggests that studies that address the subject of student engagement and feedback channels on overall consortium-wide issues such as teaching, learning, and programme management particularly in the context of international joint programmes are scarce. In the future, comparative studies could provide invaluable insight into what role cultural differences may play in academic and administrative staff's perception of the role of students in programme quality assurance and enhancement. Furthermore, the impact of organisational culture on the nature of feedback channels could be explored in detail.

Finally, the limitations of the surveys must be acknowledged. Although the use of survey method enabled amassing a large number of responses, not all responses were relevant. Accordingly, about 33.5% of responses to the question on student representatives and 36% of responses to the question on student feedback channels were incomplete, unclear or not applicable. This partly indicates the need for further work in articulating the questions and screening relevant responses for analysis. Moreover, the analysis presented in this article was entirely based on only two open-ended questions that were asked repeatedly to separately capture the experience of students in each university they attended as part of their EMJMD programmes.

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