

Quality Assurance in European Higher Education

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The role of student feedback for internal quality assurance in the Netherlands

Bachelor Thesis

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Summary

This paper is investigating the role of student feedback for quality assurance at the course level at a Dutch university. Much of the already existing literature on student feedback is about its purpose only, and fails to recognize the importance of students and especially academic staff, who are at the core of the process and whose motivations and perceptions can heavily influence the effectiveness of student feedback. To explore the views and strategies of academics, a qualitative study has been chosen, including semi-structured interviews with members of academic staff teaching within the degree programme of Public Administration at the University of Twente. Their views have been compared to the satisfaction of students with several aspects of student feedback as stated in the Nationale Studenten Enquête from 2010 to 2013. From the findings of this paper, it can be concluded that student feedback is used for at least two purposes. On the one hand, it provides information to the lecturer and facilitates quality improvement. On the other hand, it is used for managerial purposes and serves external demands for quality assurance. Academics at the within Public Administration at the University of Twente have generally positive perceptions towards student feedback, although they see some small limitations. The results of student feedback are important indications for the strengths and weaknesses of courses and are used by academics to tackle problems concerning the quality of their courses. The student-satisfaction scores about the way in which their feedback is being used within Public Administration and with the way in which students are being informed about the results and outcomes of their feedback are sufficient, but suggest that there is still need for improvement. All in all, our findings underline the need for better communication of the purpose, results and outcomes of student feedback.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with the collection, processing and use of student feedback as a part of what is described as 'Internal Quality assurance' within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Quality assurance in higher education is concerned with the transparency, control and improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of research and the quality of management and administration at institutions of higher education (HEIs) (Bernhard, 2012). Before the 1980s, quality assurance was practised as a means of informal self-regulation within faculties and groups of academics and was not determined by institutional or (supra)national regulations (Kwikkers et al, 2003). In the following decades however, quality assurance began to develop into one of the systematic characteristics of higher education (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001) and while in the early 1990s fewer than half of the European countries operated a national quality assurance system, 15 years later all but one (Greece) did (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). The rapid development of quality assurance is closely connected to the emergence of what Neave (1988) defined as the "Evaluative state". This concept included a sudden **loss of** traditional, public **trust** in governments, the emergence of markets in areas of public interest and the rise of evaluative, 'new public' forms of management. Public relevance to quality was increasing, and not only the relationship between society and government, but also the relationship of institutions of higher education with society was profoundly redefined. The **massification** of higher education and the expansion of knowledge led to heterogeneity of the quality of both students and professors (Trow, 1996), which reaffirmed suspicion and called for control. Other authors name the processes of marketisation/privatisation and internationalisation – especially Europeanization as causes for the transformation of quality assurance (see for example: Bernhard, 2012; Amarel & Rosa, 2010; De Wit, 2006).

Rowley (2003b) observes that in the course of these developments, student satisfaction has become an important issue in university-management. They increasingly try to maximise student satisfaction and to minimise dissatisfaction. One of the most common procedures to reach this state is the collection of student feedback, thus asking students about their satisfaction with different aspects of higher education. There are different possibilities to do so, ranging from informal feedback-sessions to standardized surveys and information can be collected about student-satisfactions on different levels, such as the institutional, the faculty, the programme or the course-level. In most cases, independent of the level that the information is being collected about, student feedback is obtained via the distribution of surveys and questionnaires – either on paper or electronically – to students (Harrison, 2012; Leckey & Neill, 2001).

A lot of the already existing literature on internal quality assurance and student feedback is concerned with the purpose and the managerial importance of collecting feedback. It looks at the question whether self-evaluation does take place and who is involved in it, but do not look upon the more interesting question of the impact of evaluation processes (Westerheijden, 1999). Some authors raise the question whether student feedback can actually lead to effective action. They claim that it has proved a great challenge for institutions to move from the collection of student feedback to the implementation of actions for the improvement of the quality of higher education (Harvey, 2003; Newton, 2000; Watson, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007; Harrison, 2012). Another striking fact is that most of the research that has been done in the past fails to focus on the "heart of educational processes" (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010): students and

academics, who are directly involved and affected by processes of quality assurance at the institutional level. Especially the impact of internal quality assurance on the student experience has been neglected (Harvey, 2004), which is queer given the fact that Powney and Hall (1998) argue that the most common flaw in the feedback-process is the lack of awareness among students on what is actually done with their feedback. When talking to them about student feedback, one usually gets the most interesting reactions: They are all familiar with the concept of student feedback, as they are constantly asked to fill in surveys, but none of them does actually know how their feedback is processed, why it is collected and what it would be used for. “I have always wondered what happens with all those surveys, eventually”, one student acclaimed¹.

In this paper, the opinions of academic staff as important stakeholders of education will be obtained about the process and the impact of student feedback. Their views will be compared to the satisfaction of students with the way in which the process of student feedback is being carried out. First, however, the European Context of the problem will be outlined.

1.1 European Context

Within the **European Union**, a development from strictly intergovernmental agreements to supranational decision-making with a direct impact on educational policies can be observed (De Wit, 2006): Academic qualifications and their recognition are a sensitive issue and have ever since been a focus of attention of the European Union, but education was not defined as a field of competence of the EU and did thus remain under the control of the national state. In the 1980s, the European Commission extended its competences within the field of higher education remarkably by initiating cooperation-programmes, such as the ERASMUS-programme, which was founded in 1987. This cooperation took place on a mostly intergovernmental basis, but the Commission played a crucial role in their steering and the shaping of their agendas (De Wit, 2006). From the 1990s on, European Union involvement in higher education policies stands in the sign of the discrepancy of the Maastricht Treaty. On the one hand, the treaty provides a basis for European action (see for reference: artt. 126-127 on Education, Vocational Training and Youth), while on the other hand it designates education as a prerogative of national state interest through the adoption of the Subsidiarity principle (Johnson & Wolf, 2009; Westerheijden, 1999).

In 1998, when – on a meeting for the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne in Paris – the education ministers of the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy decided to once again increase the degree of cooperation in higher education. Recognising the lack of recognition of their higher education degrees in other, European countries, they drafted the Sorbonne agreement, aiming to provide a framework for the establishment of a “‘common nomenclature’ for higher education in Europe” (Cemmel & Bekhradnia, 2008; van der Vught, 2006). The idea quickly gained popularity in other European states and in 1999, 29 EU and non-EU states entered the **Bologna agreement**. Being aware of the merits of a harmonised higher education system they signed a declaration dedicated to the conception of a “Europe of knowledge”, acknowledging the existence of “shared values” and aiming for the “[promotion of] the European system of higher education worldwide” (Johnson & Wolf, 2009; The Bologna Declaration, 1999). Being founded on a joint declaration of the Member states, the Bologna process is an intergovernmental process and relies on voluntary agreement without legal obligations (Voegtler et al, 2011). Nevertheless, the European Commission

¹ personal communication with a student of Public Administration, April 2013

plays a striking role in the process: Being its only non-state full member it does closely monitor and influence the Bologna reform agenda and under the banner of economic benefit it uses its influence to align the European research agenda with the Bologna reforms (Keeling, 2006).

Within the Bologna process, it was also decided that a **European Higher Education Area** (EHEA) should be developed (Voegtler, 2011; The Bologna Declaration, 1999). It was on the way towards the completion of the EHEA, however, – which was due in 2010 – that an entirely new set of challenges and **concerns about quality, evaluation, accreditation and transparency**, especially in the context of comparability began to emerge at the European level. The need for a pan-European set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance became apparent. By the year 2000, the **European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education** (ENQA) was founded, and in 2005, the Ministers of education adopted the **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**. These Guidelines address both, external aspects of quality assurance – executed by external review panels, and internal aspects of quality assurance – which is organised by institutions themselves and will be the focus of this study. The Guidelines act as a description of “good practice”, but national and institutional autonomy is respected and ultimately, each institution has to establish its own framework for internal quality assurance, drawing on these guidelines (ENQA, 2009).

When talking about student feedback in the context of European higher education, one does therefore have to keep in mind that it has developed into a “multi-echelon policy system”, in which several decision-making levels – namely the European, national and intergovernmental – interrelate.

1.2 Objective of the Study and Research Question

For this paper, a case study will be conducted in order to have a closer look at the use of student feedback at the University of Twente, Enschede. The Netherlands are known to be one of the forerunners in Quality Evaluation and Quality Assurance. Nevertheless, in the latest, 2013-edition of the Nationale Studenten Enquête (NSE, a national survey measuring the satisfaction of students with several aspects of higher education), students rated the way in which the results from student feedback are used within their study-programme with a score of 3.1 out of 5 – which is clearly sufficient, but suggests that there is still a possibility of improvement.

As outlined before, Student feedback can be collected at different levels (institutional, faculty, programme, courses ...). For the purposes of feasibility in this study we will focus on one type, namely feedback on the course-level, only: Several authors agree that student feedback on the institution level can be “very useful aids to improvement” (Harvey, 2003) and can lead to solutions which can be easily solvable, especially when it comes to questions of changes in infrastructure (Leckey & Neill, 2012). Harvey (2003), however, emphasizes the importance of course-level feedback, which he regards as the level where ‘qualitative comment’ is of the greatest importance. Therefore, this paper will focus on student feedback on the course-level.

Taking into account the problem statement, we pose the following research question:

What is the role of student feedback in the process of internal Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions in the Netherlands?

In order to be able to answer this broad question, three sub-questions are introduced:

I. How do (supra-)national and institutional guidelines and regulations define the contribution of student feedback to the internal quality assurance of institutions of Higher Education and what is the role of academics in this process?

This question addresses the system level of the problem. It requires an analysis of how European, national and institutional guidelines and regulations feed into and establish the feedback-process at the course-level. Additionally, it requires a description of the organisation of the process and the role that academic staff is supposed to take in the process.

II. How do academics perceive student feedback?

This question introduces an actor-analysis. It will be used to explore the opinions that academic staff have about student feedback and to investigate how their opinions influence their willingness to take part in the process. For example, theory suggests, that motivation matters especially among academic staff, because they are often reluctant to student feedback and do not acknowledge the value it might have (see for example Leckey & Neill, 2001 - this will be discussed in more detail in the theoretical framework of this study).

III. To what extent do academics use student feedback for quality improvement at the course level?

As Newton (2000) states, there is often a gap between the actual purpose of collecting student feedback –quality assurance and quality enhancement – and the use of student feedback for ‘impression management’, thus for purposes of accountability only, instead for the actual improvement of education. This theory makes it very interesting for this paper to find out in what way student feedback is used in the of internal quality assurance at the University of Twente: Does student feedback make a difference for the quality of education at the course level or is it – simply – useless in terms of genuine quality improvement?

In the following chapter, the theoretical framework for answering these questions will be discussed.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the relevant theoretical approaches for our paper. The stakeholders of higher education will be defined and their importance for the impact of student feedback will be elaborated on, drawing on stakeholder-theories by Lipsky (1980) and Newton (2000) and on Mintzberg's (1979) concept of the university as a "professional bureaucracy". Then, the notion of the university as a "corporate service industry" (Bakern & Le Tendre, 2005; Taylor et al, 1998; Krücken, 2011) and a model by Kanji et al (1999), which – based on economic theory – classifies stakeholders as 'customers' of education, will be introduced. Afterwards, several types of feedback and their (dis-)advantages and the theory of student feedback being organized in a "feedback-loop" (Harvey, 2003; Rowley, 2003; Watson, 2003; Young et al, 2011) will be discussed. Finally, the special role of academic staff, who are said to play a great role in determining the impact of student feedback (see for example Leckey & Neill, 2001; Power, 2000; Powney & Hall, 1998; Trowler, 1998; Vidovich, 1998 and Watty, 2003) will be reviewed.

2.1 Stakeholders of Higher Education and their role for student feedback

Parker and Jary (1995) argue that changes in higher education are driven on three different levels, namely the national-structural, the organisational, and the individual level. In the case of this study, taking into account the creation of the EHEA, the implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and the increasingly important role of the European Union, the inclusion of the supranational level in the analysis is necessary, too. Parker and Jary (1995) and Winter et al (2001) derive four stakeholder groups in higher education, namely government and quality agencies, institutions and individuals such as academic staff. Students might not have been specifically referred to in their classification, but Watty (2003) describes students as a legitimate stakeholder-group. Williams & Cappuccini-Ansfield (2007) support this argument and state that in the past students were often "taken for granted", but nowadays institutions are aware of the important role that students play and recognise them as the "principal stakeholders" in higher education. Therefore, we distinguish four different stakeholder groups for our study: (1) (supra-)national government and quality agencies, whose influence on student feedback we will analyze by looking at the standards, regulations and guidelines they have established about student feedback, (2) institutions, whose influence on student feedback we will analyze by looking at the institutional guidelines they have established about student feedback, and (3) academic staff and (4) students, who are participating in the process of obtaining student feedback as individual stakeholders.

So, why are these stakeholders so important in the context of student feedback?

Lipsky's (1980) states that stakeholders (in the case of this study these are academic staff and students) are the 'real makers of policy'. He claims that there is a 'gap' between what is designed by policies (measures of Quality Assurance directed by the management and by external agencies), and situational factors – such as the motivation of academic staff and students to participate in the process of obtaining and processing student feedback - which prevent that desired effects can be achieved. Mintzberg (1979) classified the university (along with hospitals, courts, ... and school systems) as an organisation functioning according to the rules of a 'professional bureaucracy'. One of the characteristic features of the professional bureaucracy is the fact that workers (in our case,

academic staff) have considerable control over their own work, and also seek “collective control” of administrative decisions (quality assurance policies) that affect them (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 358). This means, that decisions made at the managerial level – are not necessarily being reflected by actions in the core-level of activity, which is performed by academic staff and students. The concept of ‘decoupling’ (Leisyte, 2007; Leisyte et al, 2010; Power, 2002; for ‘loose coupling’ see: Weick, 1976), which is closely related to this phenomenon, will be explained at a later point, when we review the special role of academics. .

Due to these conditions, it would be “naïve” to expect the introduction of quality procedures within universities to follow a simple “top-down policy implementation process” (Harvey, 2004). Policy in higher education is “rarely implemented as anticipated”, because different stakeholders respond differently to it (McDonald, 2002, as quoted in Harvey, 2004) and student feedback as a “genuine [form of] quality enhancement can only be fully sustained if it is premised on the energies and initiatives of frontline academics” instead of being implemented by the managerial system (Newton, 2000). Even if (supra-)national and institutional regulations and frameworks exist – without the commitment of academic staff, real improvement of the quality of courses through student feedback is not likely to be achieved.

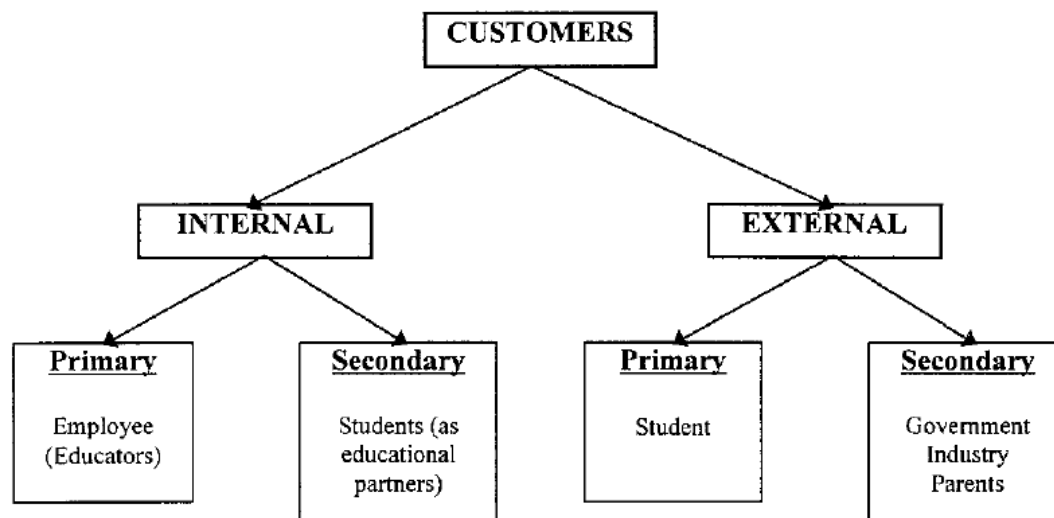
→ Therefore it will be crucial for this study not only to analyse the scope of student feedback as it is intended by (supra-)national and institutional regulations, but to pay a special regard to the question of how it is really used at the core-level of activity, by academic staff, and what they think of it.

2.2 Economic approaches: Higher Education – a corporate service industry?

While Biesta (2004) defends the ethically pronounced position of the university as a ‘res publica’, many authors put forward a more economic theory of the role of institutions of higher education. According to Baker and LeTendre (2005), there is a continuous shift in the role of universities from promoting liberal values and social justice traditions to an ideology which is based on global marketing and which is heavily influenced by the notion of “human capital”. As the state withdraws from direct involvement in higher education and engages increasingly into a “steering at distance”-approach, the university is emerging more and more into an organisational, strategic actor, driven by goal-oriented thinking (Krücken, 2011). Administrations are increasingly motivated to re-establish higher education into a “corporate service industry” (Taylor et al, 1998), or corporate university (Krücken, 2011).

It has long been debated, whether quality assurance – a concept from the private sector – can be related to higher education (Watson, 2003). Doing so would mean that students would be declared consumers to the product of education. Subsequently, consumer protection would become the new argument for quality assurance (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001). Whether or not to regard students as customers of higher education is highly debated, and some people are highly opposed to it. Kanji et al (1999), however, established the following model (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Students as buyer, user and partner of education



Source: Kanji et al (1999).

In Kanji et al's (1999) model of customers in higher education, customers are either internal or external, depending whether they are placed within or outside of the institution. They refer to the four stakeholder groups which we have determined before, namely government (in our case those who make (supra-)national or institutional guidelines about student feedback), Employees (Educators – thus, teaching academic staff) and students. Kanji et al (1999) do also include the industry and parents as a stakeholder group. As a part of society, their demand for quality and control has led to the emergence of new public management forms of governance and thus also the rise of quality assurance (see Introduction), but their role will not be further elaborated on in this paper. According to this model, students have a twofold role in higher education: In the internal sense, students are both users and partners of education and equally responsible for the outcomes of the learning process. To fulfil this function, they have to cooperate as well as learn from academic staff. In the external sense, students – both current students and possible, future students – are seen as the buyers of education. According to Kanji et al. (1999), the model is working if all internal customers are working towards the satisfaction of the external customers, thus students, government, the industry and parents. Additionally, Eggertsson (1990, as quoted in Westerheijden, 2007) describes education as the “*nec plus ultra* of ‘experience goods’”, which “can be measured only by using the product”, thus, by students themselves.

➔ The notion of the students as both a customer and partner of higher education and the classification of education as an “experience good” validate again their characterisation as stakeholders and reinforces their important role within this study. Additionally, this economic notion allows us to justify the concept of ‘consumer satisfaction’, which plays an important role in Harvey’s (2003) satisfaction-circle, one of the models of evaluating and improving the quality of courses which will be introduced in the following lines.

2.3 Models of evaluating and improving the quality of courses

How does the perfect process of obtaining and implementing the student view on the quality of courses look? Various models are suggested in the literature (see for example Power, 2000; Brookes, 2003 and Harvey, 2003), but all of them are similar in the sense of seeing the process of evaluation as a circle. Before returning to these courses and introducing Harvey's (2003) satisfaction-circle, different types of student feedback and their (dis-)advantages will be discussed.

Student feedback can be collected on different levels – e.g. the institutional level, the faculty level, the programme-level, the course-level or as an evaluation of the overall satisfaction of student in a certain time-frame, for example their first year, or after graduation (Harvey, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001). Moreover, the process of student feedback can take place in various forms: in informal settings, such as small meetings between academic staff and students, in officially initiated feedback sessions with a small part of the student body, or by distributing surveys – either electronically or on paper and with different degrees of standardization. In general, it seems that academics do generally regard informal discussions with students as most valuable manner of obtaining student feedback. This method does though bear greater costs in terms of time and effort and makes it difficult to investigate the opinion of the student-body as a whole (Harrisson, 2012.) Due to the fact that they are low in effort but despite the fact that they are also considered low in value, questionnaires are still used the most in order to derive student feedback (Harrisson, 2012). On the one hand, self completion questionnaires enable data to be collected from as large a sample of the student population as possible, in a cost effective way (Finn et al, quoted in: Brookes, 2003), but on the other hand, all survey-style questionnaires have a relatively high degree of standardization and may therefore not always provide deeper insights into problems.

Harvey (2003) proposes the use of surveys in order to obtain the student view. He takes up the economic notion of 'consumer satisfaction' again, and refers to the process of collecting student feedback as a "Satisfaction Circle" (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The Satisfaction Circle



Source: Harvey (2003)

The Satisfaction Circle and many other models that are being presented in literature about student feedback and audit (see for example Power, 2000 and Brookes, 2003) describe the process of collecting student feedback and processing it for an effective impact on the quality of education as a 'loop'. After feedback has been obtained through questionnaires, the results have to be thoroughly analysed. Areas for action have to be noted and action plans for how to improve the current situation have to be made and have to be implemented in the lecture hall by academic staff. A section which is outlined as especially important in all models is the feedback to stakeholders. Powney and Hall (1998) argue that the most common flaw in the feedback-process is the lack of awareness among students on what is actually done with their feedback. Therefore, students have to be informed not only about the results of the questionnaires, but also about the consequences that their feedback has for the improvement of the quality of the courses they evaluated.

Closing the feedback-loop, that means analysing the results of student feedback, establishing an action plan, taking action when necessary and communicating results and actions back to students, is presented as essential in the work of most authors (see for example: Harvey (2003), Rowley (2003), Watson (2003), Young et al (2011)). They point out that if parts of this 'loop' are neglected, the process of collecting student feedback will be ineffective, leading to a gap between the aim of enhancing quality and the actual practice of improvement (Young, 2011). Power (2000), however, points to the fact that these loops, circles and cycles are only "blueprints", and questions the capability of institutions to ever be able to function according to the model.

Although Harvey talks about student feedback as a process to satisfy the consumer (students), academic staff play a crucial role, as they are the ones who determine the ultimate implementation of changes in the lecture hall. The models presented outline the importance of the "integrity" of the feedback-"loop" (Power, 2000). Only if all stakeholders participate in an adequate manner, the outcomes will be effective and can lead to an improvement of the quality of courses.

→ In our study we will therefore focus on the following three elements: Are students capable of giving adequate feedback? Does academic staff consider student feedback as an important source for the improvement of their teaching and do they implement changes? Are results and changes communicated back or are they noticeable for students in any other way?

Further reasons of why student feedback may not always lead to effective outcomes are associated to academic distrust and its consequences and will be discussed in the following passage.

2.4 Academic Distrust and its Consequences

The evolution of the university into a corporate organisation (as described before: Krücken, 2011) has led to an increase in managerial activities at the institutional level. As a consequence, greater control of academic activity has emerged. While in the past, academic staff was rather autonomous in their teaching, recently a great reduction of academic autonomy has taken place (Musselin, 2013). Especially the increasing engagement into measures of quality assurance, such as evaluation and monitoring, lead to a changing working environment for academics (Leisyte, 2007). Because of this, and of other reason that will be reflected on in this section, many authors (see for example Leckey & Neill, 2001; Power, 2000; Powney & Hall, 1998; Trowler, 1998; Vidovich, 1998 and Watty, 2003)

suggest that academic staff have a special relation to student feedback and that the attitude of academic staff plays a special role in determining the effectiveness of student feedback.

First of all, literature suggests that academic staff do generally distrust anything that is connected with the rapidly developing concept of quality assurance. Watty (2003) argues, that this is the case, because a conflict has emerged between the 'managerial expectations' of the quality of education and the perception that academics have about it. Research conducted in the past has led to the conclusion that there are differences in the ways in which academic staff deal with measures of quality assurance, but that in general, a great part of staff do not approve of them. Vidovich (1998) studied the behaviour of academics in Australian higher education towards measures that are viewed as an outcome of quality policy implementation. In her study, more than half of the academics that were interviewed showed some kind of resistance towards measures of quality assurance, ranging from objection, refusal and careless responses to delaying tactics. Trowler (1998) conducted a similar research in an institution of higher education in the United Kingdom. He identified four categories of behaviour of academics: The ones, who approve of changes associated with quality assurance and regard them as an opportunity; the ones that try to work around changes; the ones trying to actively reconstruct the policies leading to changes; and the ones that do not approve of changes and cope with the situation by treating them as mere rituals. Another categorization of academic strategies in responding to managerial demands can be found in Leisyte's (2007) work, which is based on a study of research units in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. She concludes that academics are generally negative about increasing requirements of quality assurance, but that they do nevertheless regard them as a "rule of game", which they have to comply to in order to ensure their survival, e.g. in the form of internal and external funding. Among the academics, who oppose change, different strategies, leading from passive and symbolic compliance to pro-active manipulation, are used. These strategies are no more than "formal responses to external demand", which are being employed for purposes of legitimacy, while actual practices remain untouched by change, and are referred to as 'decoupling' in literature (Leisyte, 2007; Leisyte et al, 2010, Power, 2002), or 'loose coupling' (Weick, 1976). Power (2000) applies the concept of decoupling directly to auditing processes. He argues that as soon as auditing processes emerge as requirements of university quality assurance, they will get decoupled from the core activities, which involve students and academic staff. In such a case – he argues – the audit process might be accepted and performed, but becomes a "harmless ritual", which does officially serve as a measure of internal quality assurance, but does not bear any consequences for the quality of courses.

→ If these theories hold true, we can therefore expect to encounter at least some degree of rejection towards student feedback among the member of academic staff that are going to be interviewed. We have to keep in mind that, even if we can conclude from a review of literature and from our interviews that student feedback is being obtained and processed at the two institutions, it may not necessarily lead to an improvement of the quality of courses. It may just as well have been put in place for purposes of legitimacy towards managerial demands external review panels.

Additionally, Leckey and Neill (2001, p.26) identify further reasons for which staff are reluctant to student feedback. On the one hand, they are unable to identify with the feedback system, because it is not their own creation, but has been imposed upon them by higher, managerial levels. Additionally, they oppose to feedback, because they think that students are not adequately trained to give feedback on the contents or methods of teaching. Powney and Hall (1998) have made similar

observations and do even go further. According to them, academic distrust towards student feedback and lack of recognition of the student views about the quality of courses leads to the fact that students themselves start to perceive the feedback-process as a “meaningless, result-less ritual” and do not undertake serious efforts to give feedback.

➔ This leads to a second expectation for our study: If academic staff believe that students are not capable of giving valuable feedback, they are less likely to make changes to the content of their courses and to their style of teaching on basis of the findings derived from student feedback. Moreover, the satisfaction of students with the way in which the outcomes of their feedback are being used is crucial for the functioning of the feedback-loop. If students have the feeling that their feedback does not lead to changes at the course-level, they are likely to retreat into a state of resignation.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the overall design of the study will be discussed. On the basis of the theoretical assumptions that we have discussed, the main concepts of the study will be conceptualised into variables. The quality improvement of courses in higher education, which is our dependent variable, will be defined in order to fully understand its nature, and indicators for the two independent variables of this study will be defined. Finally, we will reflect on the design of this study, defend our case selection and explain how the collection of data will be exercised.

3.1 Operationalisation

The main concept of this study is Quality Assurance; student feedback is only one lower part of it. We aim at finding out whether student feedback does make a difference for the quality of courses in higher education. Therefore, the quality of courses – more specifically, quality improvement – is the dependent variable of this study. From the theories that have been elaborated, it became apparent that the most important factors determining are a) the general organisation of student feedback, which is shaped by the influence of (supra-)national and institutional guidelines and provisions, and b) the way in which academic staff and students perceive student feedback. From the expectations framed by existing theory, we can assume that both academics and students are crucial for the functioning of student feedback, but that the motivations and perceptions of students depend heavily on the actions of academic staff. Therefore the main focus will be on academic staff, and the perception of students will be analysed using secondary data from an existing national survey only. In order to find out how academics perceive student feedback, a set of indicators will have to be introduced. The theoretical framework has offered us evidence for a number of expectations on which we can base these indicators. First, however, we will discuss the concepts ‘Quality Assurance’ and ‘Quality Improvement’ in the context of this study.

Quality Assurance

Quality is a highly contested term in higher education. Ideas about quality are “judgmental” and “value related” (Watty, 2003). It can be said, that all parties have an interest in quality, but that nevertheless not everyone has the same idea about it (Vroeijenstijn, 1992), which leads to disputes between various stakeholders in the higher education sector (Watty, 2003). Harvey (2004, quoting Harvey and Green) established five different notions of quality: quality as ‘excellence’, quality as ‘conformity to standards’, quality as ‘fitness for purpose’, quality as ‘value for money’ and quality as ‘transformation’. We will not dwell on these definitions, but settle on the fact that there is no definition of ‘quality’ in higher education as such (Westerheijden, 1999).

The notion of *quality assurance* derives originally from the manufacturing industry (Westerheijden, 1999). In their definition, the Marketing Accountability Standards Board (MASB, 2013) states that quality assurance is a systematic measurement and thus concerned with a “standard, monitoring of **processes** and an associated **feedback loop** that confers error prevention“. In higher education, quality assurance can be understood as the process of „modernisation and professionalization of academic cultures and roles“(IBAR, nd).

Quality improvement

As there is no agreed definition of 'quality', a satisfied definition of quality improvement is even more difficult to establish. Therefore, and for the purpose of this paper, we do not seek to define quality improvement as such. Instead, we will try to outline the ambiguous nature of the concept. Houston (2008, p. 62) states, that there is often a gap between the 'rhetoric of quality and the practice of improvement'. Quality assurance has created "illusory tensions" by suggesting that the process of monitoring quality – for example via student feedback – are "intrinsically linked" to the improvement of quality (Harvey & Newton, 2007). As this is not the case, student feedback does not necessarily lead to an improvement of the quality of courses. In order to be able to measure quality improvement in the course of our analysis, we will conceptualise it as follows, in the sense of consumer satisfaction: The term 'quality improvement' in the context of the course-level refers to *changes that are being made to the content of a course or the teaching performance of the teacher of a course as a consequence of the suggestions of students, who are the 'ultimate customer of higher education'*. Whether or not these changes do reflect an improvement of the concept of quality as it is seen by stakeholders other than students, for example academic staff, remains contested.

Returning to our second, independent variable ('the way in which academics perceive student feedback'): Literature has outlined that there are different factors determining the opinions that academic staff and students have about student feedback. These opinions affect their motivations and also the efficiency of the impact of student feedback on the improvement of the quality of courses. If staff and students do not actively and seriously take part in the processes that are related to the feedback-loop, the collection of student feedback might turn out to be a measure for satisfying external demands, which has no further impact on the quality of courses at all. Based on evidence from existing theory, we expect that for students, it is important that academic staff takes their feedback serious, that it leads to changes and that these changes are reported back to them. The way in which academics perceive student feedback are in turn constructed by:

- The costs (efforts of processing feedback and making changes to the contents of the course and the teaching performance) and value of feedback
- The degree to which academic staff perceives students as capable of giving feedback on the quality of a course
- The degree to which academic staff do oppose the top-down imposed measures of quality assurance in general and to which they regard student feedback as a managerial tool

These expectations will be used to establish the questions for the interviews with members of academic staff. Furthermore, we expect that the motivation of students is highly dependent on the way staff evaluate their feedback on the one hand, and on the degree of results being reported back to them. The latter will be analysed by taking into account the statements of academic staff as well as the satisfaction of students with the very point as indicated by the Nationale Studenten Enquête in the timeframe of 2010 to 2013.

The observation-matrix in Table 1 below summarizes the most important dimensions and possible indicators for the motivations of academic staff and satisfaction of students, explains through which data sources they will be investigated and links them to our two corresponding research-questions.

Dimensions	Costs/efforts of student feedback	Usefulness of student feedback	Purpose of student feedback	Consequences of student feedback for the course	Reporting of results
Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - time used for collecting and analysing feedback - efforts dedicated to making changes to courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use positive words such as helpful, useful, valuable, ... - use phrases such as reflection on, improve quality, tackle problems, ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - state why they think student feedback is collected - refer to different purposes such as information for the academic or for the management level - state in how far student feedback is meant to improve quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - changes have or have not been implemented - what kind of consequences (for assignments, for examinations, for the course content) - score for satisfaction of students with the way in which results are used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - refer to the level to which results should be made available (management only, students of the course, all students, publicly available) - score for satisfaction of students with the availability of results
Data Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (Supra-)national and institutional guidelines and provisions - Interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview - NSE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview - NSE
Corresponding Research Question	2	2	5	3	3

Table 1: Observation-Matrix: Indicators for the perceptions of staff (interview) and students (data from the Nationale Studenten Enquête, NSE), by data sources and corresponding Research question

3.2 Research Design and Research Population

For this research, a qualitative analysis will be conducted, making use of a case-study of the use and impact of student feedback at the course-level in the Netherlands. Although our main research question might seem to be descriptive, qualitative evaluation is essential for answering the sub-questions, for which the personal opinion of academic staff and students need to be obtained. Additionally, the qualitative design allows the researcher to gain an overview of the organisation of processes without having to be able to formulate statistically testable hypothesis first. A case study is a design which focuses on “understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1987). This design is especially useful in the context of student feedback, where generalizability is very difficult to be obtained because of its high sensitivity for institutional contexts and its tendency to differ in scope and impact, not only between countries, but even within institutions in a single country. As outlined in the introduction, the Netherlands are particularly interesting for this study, on the one hand because of a lack of research on student feedback in Dutch higher education institutions and on the other hand because the satisfaction of students with the way in which student feedback is processed is insufficient (Nationale Studenten Enquête, 2010-2013). With a total score of 3.1 on this topic, the University of Twente belongs to the average performing universities in the Netherlands and is an ideal case to look at in this study.

We are going to collect data about student feedback within the study-programme of Public Administration. Public Administration had the lowest score of all programmes at the University of Twente in 2012 and 2013 and while the level of student satisfaction with the way in which student feedback is used within their programmes has increased in total at the University until 2012, the level of satisfaction within Public Administration decreased within the same time frame. It is especially interesting to compare the decrease in student satisfaction with the information gained from the experiences of academics.

Thus, our unit of analysis is the study programme of Public Administration, including its degrees ‘Bestuurskunde’ and ‘European Studies’, which are currently registered under the same accreditation code. How we are going to collect our data will be explained in the following section.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

In this study, three different data collection methods are being used. The first method – delivering information about European, national and institutional guidelines – involves the analysis of primary sources such as regulations and policy documents as well as secondary sources such as existing literature on the topic of quality assurance and student feedback. The second method – revealing the opinions of academics – includes interviews that have been conducted with members of academic staff teaching in Public Administration at the University of Twente. The third method comprises the analysis of a small part of the Nationale Studenten Enquête, a national survey conducted amongst students of all higher education institutions in the Netherlands.

Review of regulations, policy documents and secondary sources

Both, (supra)national and institutional guidelines are crucial in determining the processes of collecting, analysing and considering student feedback on the course level. In order to answer our

first research question and to find out how the existing guidelines define student feedback and the role of academics in the process, different data sources have been used. The most important sources are primary sources such as guidelines, regulations and policy documents drafted by the respective bodies. Here, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG), several frameworks and strategies stated by the Dutch quality assurance agency, the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO), and documents published by the University of Twente are our most important points of reference. For background information, we will draw on literature about quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area, for example by Peter Kwikkers and Don Westerheijden.

Interviews

In order to obtain the opinion of academic staff about student feedback, interviews have been conducted with a small number of academic staff, who have been teaching courses for Public Administration students within the last three study-years. The number of academic staff teaching in Public Administration is relatively low. A great number of them were asked to participate in the study, but eventually respondents had to agree to participate, which equaled self-selection.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were semi-structured, based on a set of determined questions but allowing for new topics to emerge in the course of the interview. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed taking into consideration the indicators presented in our observation matrix. For the sake of anonymity, all information that reveals the identity of the respondents was removed in this paper.

The interview questions can be found in the Annex.

Nationale Studenten Enquête (NSE)

In order to be able to provide some evidence about the satisfaction of students with the way in which student feedback is used at the study-programme Public Administration at the University of Twente, data collected throughout the last 4 years by the Nationale Studenten Enquête (NSE) will be used. The NSE is an annual survey which is conducted at the national level. It measures the satisfaction of students with several aspects of quality of their higher education institution, ranging from general, infrastructural issues to specifically study-related questions. The results are being presented on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest score. We will be focusing on the survey obtaining the student view, more specifically on the topic of quality assurance [kwaliteitzorg]. Within this topic, there are three subjects which are of an interest for our study:

- a) The collection of student feedback in general [Onderwijsevaluaties die onder studenten plaatsvinden]
- b) The degree of information which students get about the results of student feedback [Informatie over de uitkomsten van onderwijsevaluaties]
- c) The way in which the results of student feedback are being used within the study-programme [De wijze waarop je opleiding gebruik maakt van de uitkomsten van onderwijsevaluaties]

Ratings on these subjects are available for the University of Twente in total, for the bachelor's degree of Public Administration at the University of Twente as well as for the national average for the years 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. In the Dutch grading system, a score of 5.5 out of 10 is regarded as sufficient. We will translate this criterion for our analysis of the NSE-data and will regard any score which equals or lies above 2.5 as sufficient.

3.3.1 Feasibility

Interviews belong to the most important strategies for obtaining qualitative data. Especially in interviews which seek to explore meanings and perceptions, it is important to use semi-structured interviews, which are organised around a set of predetermined, open-ended questions. DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) point out that it is important to have a research question which is sufficiently focused, so that a relatively homogeneous group of respondents will share similar experiences. Additionally, questions have to be clearly formulated in order to avoid confusion (Babbie, 2004). The advantage of semi-structured interviews is the fact that they encourage the respondents to give "rich descriptions" and leave interpretation and analysis to the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). We can therefore expect a deep insight into the perceptions of the members of academic staff that have been interviewed. On the other hand, the small number of respondents and the fact that we focus on student feedback in one study-programme, namely Public Administration, at one University only hinders generalisability. In an ideal case, more interviews should have been conducted. Alas this was not possible due to the time-restraints that a study of this scope faces and due to the fact that we depended on the voluntary participation of members of the relatively small group of academic staff within Public Administration.

As the only tool of such a broad scope within the Netherlands, the **Nationale Studenten Enquête** enjoys a high reputation and is considered one of the most important feedback-tools for Dutch higher education institutions (see for example: Studiekeuze 123 (nd); Universiteit Utrecht, 2013). But how representative are the results of the Nationale Studenten Enquête for Public Administration? Information about the precise number of students that filled in the survey within Public Administration is not available. Therefore we have considered the overall response rate of the survey of 2013 for the University of Twente and have compared it to the percentage of students registered at the University of Twente, who have been subscribed to the bachelor's degree of Public Administration in the study year of 2012/13: In the mentioned year, 293 students were subscribed to the Public Administration Bachelor, which constitutes about 3.2% of the Universities whole population (9193 students). 3607 students of the University of Twente have filled in the Nationale Studenten Enquête in 2013 (NSE, 2013). Calculating a confidence level of 95%, we derive a Confidence Interval of +/- 0.57. Thus, we can be 95% sure that the true population lies between 2.63% and 3.77% and that respectively we can expect that between 95 and 136 students of Public Administration have filled in the survey in the year 2013. This represents at least one third (32%) to nearly half (46%) of all students that have been subscribed to the Bachelor's degree of Public Administration in the study-year 2012/13. We cannot conclude that the results of the Nationale Studenten Enquête are fully representative, but we expect that they do at least offer us a valid indication of the opinions of students about the way in which student feedback is being used within the programme of Public Administration at the University of Twente.

4. Guidelines and provisions for student feedback

Both (supra-)national and institutional guidelines and provisions define and contribute to the internal quality assurance and to the use of student feedback. In this chapter, these guidelines and provisions will be analysed. We are first going to look at the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Then, the activities and influences of the Quality Assurance Agency which is currently entitled to control and accreditation in the Netherlands, the NVAO, will be reviewed. Finally, we will focus on the way in which the process of student feedback is supposed to be carried out at the University of Twente, and more specifically within the Faculty of Management and Governance, where the study-programme of Public Administration is located.

4.1 (Supra-)national and guidelines and provisions

Quality assurance on the national level has a slightly older history than on the European level and dates back to the early 1980s. European quality assurance initiatives, introduced by the European Commission, emerged in the first half of the 1990s, as a consequence of the Erasmus exchange programme and the subsequent need for the mutual recognition of the quality of education within European countries. In order to harmonise quality assurance procedures within the European Higher Education Area and consequent upon the adoption of a Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council in 1998, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was founded in 2000 (European Consortium for Accreditation, 2012). Nowadays, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which will be discussed in the following section, define both the internal quality assurance policies of institutions as well as the way in which they are being externally reviewed by quality assurance agencies.

4.1.1 Quality Assurance and Student feedback in the European Higher Education Area

In the course of the Bologna Process, the European Ministers of Education decided that future reforms and developments in Education should take place “in close cooperation with student and employer representatives”. Higher education institutions are asked to pay “particular attention to improving the teaching quality of their study programmes”. In future versions of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education, this matter should be a priority (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).

The **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)** were published in 2005 and have last been reviewed in 2009. As mentioned before, at the moment there are four organisations – also referred to as the ‘E4’ – which are engaged with the task of constantly setting up and reviewing these Standards and Guidelines, namely the European Network for Quality Assurance in higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European Students’ Union (ESU). Within five years after the first version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance were published in 2005 – thus in 2010 – institutions and external quality assurance agencies were expected to align their activities to the standards and guidelines.

Concerning the internal quality assurance of institutions, the European guidelines remain vague. They state, that each higher education institution should commit themselves to a culture of quality and quality assurance and that they should formulate publicly available strategies, policies and procedures, stating, amongst other things, clearly

- The institution's strategy for quality and standards
- The organisation of the quality assurance system
- The responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units
- The responsibilities of individuals
- The ways in which these policies are implemented, monitored and revised.

Additionally, institutions are expected to make sure that programmes are regularly monitored and reviewed, and that teaching staff is qualified and competent. Furthermore, it is expected that students as important stakeholders can take part in internal quality assurance measures (ENQA, 2009, Part I: pp 16-19).

Thus, European guidelines are meant to provide a "transparent and well-articulated overarching framework", within which quality assurance agencies and institution enjoy the freedom of establishing their own strategies and policies (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005). The collection of student feedback, or course-evaluation by students, is not mentioned directly in the guidelines, but the active involvement of students in internal quality assurance and the regular monitoring of the quality of study-programmes are explicitly required. Institution's internal policies and procedures are then supposed to be taken into account for the assessment by – usually national – external quality assurance agencies (ENQA, 2009, Part II: 2.1). The behaviour of these agencies is, anon, also regulated by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. One of them, the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO), which is in charge of external quality assurance and accreditation for higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders, will be described in the following section.

4.1.2 Quality Assurance and Student feedback in the Netherlands

Measures of quality assurance, accreditation and evaluation have significantly increased and undergone great changes within the last two decades. Next to the United Kingdom, the Netherlands are seen as one of the forerunners in quality assurance policies. While in 1992, more than half of the European countries did not focus on evaluation procedures other than on an internal level, in the Netherlands, universities were already evaluated on a supra-institutional, external basis (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Also, since the European higher education ministers decided so in 2005, it is mandatory that each country develops a higher education qualifications framework on the national level.

The rapid developments of the Dutch quality assurance system were closely connected to the government's 'Conditional Funding' policy, introducing a "value for money" approach, which implied that in order to receive funding, universities had to deliver a certain degree of quality. In the early years, from 1986 onwards, quality assessment was coordinated by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and the Association of 'hogeschole' (HBO council). The VSNU introduced the review of study-programmes, rather than institutions as a whole, and introduced a combination of internal self-evaluation and external evaluation through a visiting committee. They saw self-

evaluation reports as an important process, through which faculties should become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses (Jeliaskova & Westerheijden, 2004, pp 328-331).

Accreditation and Quality Assurance continued to change over the years, until in late 2002, as a result of European developments due to the Bologna process, a national system exercised by the Nederlandse Accreditatie Organisatie (NAO) was introduced. Just a couple of months later, the NAO was replaced by a body being in charge of accreditation and quality assurance in both the Netherlands and Flanders, namely the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO) (NVAO, 2004). The NVAO coordinates, but does not conduct itself research about the quality of higher education: it depends on the reports of appointed experts (Kwikkers et al, 2003).

In the course of the accreditation process of already existing study programmes that have already obtained a positive judgement, institutions are asked for a critical self-reflection, addressing the question how much they are “in control of the quality of the programmes offered” (NVAO, 2011). In their *Assessment frameworks for the higher education accreditation system*, the NVAO specifies that in this critical reflection, “the programme [has to outline] how it checks student and staff satisfaction and reports on the results”. Additionally, they outline the importance of students as stakeholders of education as stated in its Strategy for 2012-2016. In this strategy the involvement of students in assessing the quality of education is absolutely necessary and can contribute to student evolving from mere “education customers” to “education participants” (NVAO, 2012). In which way precisely the satisfaction of students is supposed to be measured remains unstated and will have to be defined by institutions themselves. In the following, the University of Twente’s approach to quality assurance and the use of student feedback will be presented.

4.2 Institutional guidelines and provisions – Student feedback at the University of Twente

The Quality of Education is a central concern of the University of Twente, and quality is assured from different perspectives: Each study-programme is supervised by an Educational Director, externally accredited by NVAO and/or European Accreditation Association, such – as in the case of Public Administration – the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). Finally, the quality of education is continuously evaluated by academic staff and students (University of Twente, n.d. (a); University of Twente, n.d. (b)). Regulations on internal quality assurance are drafted within each faculty individually.

The faculty of Management and Governance, where the programme of Public Administration is located, does so in their Rules and Regulations (R&R) as adopted by the Examination Board of the Faculty (School of Management and Governance, 2012). In section D1 on Quality Assurance of this document, the faculty state that they make use of a system which is “designed to improve the education on an on-going basis”. Evaluations are supposed to cover different levels, namely individual courses as well as the programme as a whole. The Rules and Regulations allow for two different types of course-evaluations by students: Questionnaires or online surveys on the one hand and panel discussions on the other hand. The overall purpose of collecting feedback is defined as highlighting “the strong points and any problem areas in order to improve the course where possible” (School of Management and Governance, 2012). Institutional documents do also outline the importance of the contribution of stakeholders for internal quality assurance: Students are “expected to make a contribution” to quality improvement by filling out surveys or participating in

panel talks (School of Management and Governance, 2012), while academics are described as the “essential figure in the evaluation process”, bearing a responsibility which is an “essential prerequisite of improvement” (NewsMail for UT Employees, 2013).

Every course is evaluated by students upon conclusion of the course – either during the exam or a final lecture – and feedback is thus collected at the end of every quartile. The process of student feedback is coordinated by the Opleidings Kwaliteit Commissie (OKC). They create a survey-questionnaire, which does usually include questions about the workload and content of courses, the location, strengths and weaknesses of lectures, the appropriateness of assessment and examinations and characteristics of the lecturer (University of Twente, n.d. (d)). More detailed information about the type of standard question asked in the student feedback survey can be found in the Appendix (2.). The survey-forms are sent to the lecturers of each course, who will distribute them to their students, collect them and return them to the OKC. The forms are processed by the OKC and a report about the results will be send to the lecturers. Additionally, information about results of course-evaluations is publicly published on the OKC’s website. Furthermore, the education director and the programme committee of each study programme are informed about the results and can, if necessary, “undertake action in order to improve the quality of the curriculum” (School of Management and Governance, 2012; Opleidings Kwaliteit Commissie, nd.).

According to Chmielecka & Brdulak (IBAR, 2013), it is usual in the Netherlands to link course evaluations to the performance measurement of academic staff in promotion processes. In its human resources policies, the University of Twente confirms this: If, for example, a lecturer applies for a higher position within the University of Twente’s ambitious ‘Tenure Track’ programme, he or she does have to be “an enthusiastic and effective lecturer as demonstrated by student evaluations” (University of Twente, n.d. (c): Phase 3: 2.).

Thus, we can conclude that European guidelines and provisions require certain standards for quality assurance, promote the cooperation with students in educational matters, and try to sustain the improvement of teaching quality at the programme-level, while they do not include specific rules about the use of student feedback. In the national, Dutch accreditation framework, it is clearly stated that the satisfaction of students has to be measured and reported, and at the University of Twente, student-feedback is an important part of the policies for internal quality assurance: Several documents describe the importance and process of student feedback, and the results of evaluations are even used as a promotion criteria for academics.

5. Perceptions of academics and students

This chapter will provide an analysis of the perceptions that academics and students have about the process, use and consequences of student feedback, based on data derived from interviews with members of academic staff and on satisfaction scores provided by the Nationale Studenten Enquête.

In the first part of the chapter, we will focus on the way in which academics perceive student feedback. We defined the usefulness of student feedback and the cost and efforts of collecting and processing feedback as the main dimensions underlying their perceptions. We will first investigate what they perceive as the purpose of student feedback and how they evaluate the capability of students to give feedback. Then we will take a closer look at the role of academic staff in the process of student feedback and the costs and efforts that are implied for themselves and others, and at their perceptions about the influence of student feedback on academic freedom.

The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the question whether student feedback leads to quality improvement on the course-level. It will take into account the degree to which academics indicate that they use student feedback in order to review and implement changes in their courses, as well as the satisfaction-scores of students with the way in which their feedback is being used within Public Administration, as provided by the NSE. Finally, we will investigate the degree and level to which academics are in favour of publishing the results of student feedback, and the degree to which students are satisfied with the way in which they are informed about those results.

5.1 How do academics perceive student feedback?

In the theoretical chapter of this paper, we already referred to Newton's (2000) theory that "quality enhancement can only be fully sustained if it is premised on the energies and initiatives of frontline academics". Only if academics support the use of student feedback in the way in which it is implemented by regulations of the Faculty of Management and Governance, it can be expected that it can contribute to quality improvement effectively. So, what does academic staff within Public Administration at the University of Twente think about student feedback?

5.1.1 The purpose of student feedback

One of the respondents referred to our question what they regarded as the purpose of student feedback as the "key question" of the interview. Three purposes were named:

(1) The first purpose, which all respondents referred to immediately, is providing lecturers themselves with feedback about their courses. This feedback serves as an "extra feedback point that makes [lecturers] focus on different aspects of teaching" – additional to the ones that they already notice during the teaching process (Respondent 2). It helps to "identify the weakness and strength" of a course as students have experienced it, and can provide indications of how to improve things that are not going well (Respondent 1). One of the respondents did also mention a reinforcing function of student feedback: "If you put a lot of effort and things have been going well just seeing the forms where people give a rating that is positive [it is rewarding]" (Respondent 3). Information for the lecturer him- or herself is definitely the most important purpose of student feedback for all

respondents: They noted that for them as academics it was the “most relevant” purpose, and “the first reason and the most important reason” (Respondent 1) of all.

(2) A second purpose that was mentioned in all interviews concerned the “managerial purpose” of student feedback. Feedback provides the management of the study programme with the possibility of “[monitoring] the perception upon the teaching process” (Respondent 2).

(3) Additionally, one of the respondents also referred to the role of students in giving student feedback: A third purpose of student feedback is to involve students more and to make them “aware that they need to pay attention to some things of the teaching process as well” (Respondent 2).

All of our respondents acknowledged the fact that the use of student feedback has increased overall and that it has become a “standard procedure” at universities. One of them did however utter severe criticism about recent developments. The interviewee stated that the “original (...) [and] substantial purpose is to improve the quality” of courses, meaning that “the ONLY one who is entitled to this information [the results from student feedback] is the lecturer” himself. “This is how it should be, but this is not how it works”, he says. In his mind, with increasing managerial control, the evaluation of academic staff through performance indicators and the influence of evaluation outcomes on academic career steps a “wrong use” of student feedback is deplorable (Respondent 1).

5.1.2 The capability of students to give feedback

Theory suggests that the degree to which academic staff does regard students as capable of giving feedback can have a huge influence on how serious they take it for improving the quality of their courses. We asked our respondents to indicate the capability of students to give feedback on the quality of courses on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. Scores turned out relatively high amongst our respondents.

Our first respondent gave a score of 3 out of 5, saying that “student feedback is efficient”, but that there might be a “conflict of expectations”. The academic or scientist might have a different “norm” for determining what a “good course” is than the student. Our respondent claims that these norms are “to a very high extend reconcilable, but at times [they are] not”.

The other two respondents gave a score of 4 out of 5. One admitted that students are “very accurate in indicating weak points” of courses (Respondent 2), the other says that “in general, [he trusts] their judgement” (Respondent 3).

Examples of why our respondents do not always regard student feedback as useful were:

- Students do not differentiate between questions, the answers to content wise independent questions seem to correlate.
- Students would prefer literature and exams to be easier, while the lecturer has to maintain a certain scientific level within his or her courses.
- Students complain about lacking information, while this information is clearly available in the online learning environment (Blackboard).

Furthermore, our respondents mentioned external factors that can hinder an objective judgement on behalf of the students. These factors include situational factors such as the weather or illness, infrastructural factors such as capacity and light in lecture halls, and others. One of our respondents

also mentioned “elements of passion and emotion” that play an role in the scores students give when providing feedback (Respondent 1). As student feedback within Public Administration at the University of Twente is collected during the exams, stress, or even anger about a possibly failed exam can influence the judgement of students.

5.1.3 The role of the academic in the process of student feedback – cost and efforts

As outlined in Chapter 4 in the section about the institutional guidelines and provisions for student feedback within Public Administration, a committee called the Opleidings Kwaliteit Commissie (OKC) is responsible for collecting and processing student feedback. The members of academic staff who have been interviewed are all aware of the existence of this committee and explained that they cooperate with the OKC by providing them with general information about their courses, for example the number of students, the examination date and language of instruction. For the student course evaluation survey they provide additional questions that they would like to be included into the surveys for their own courses. Student feedback is collected through survey questionnaires, which the lecturers distribute to the students during the exam, collect them afterwards and return to the OKC, which provides them with a summary of the findings a couple of weeks later. Subsequently, it is the role of the academic to make use of the results of student feedback. The respondents indicated that in case their courses were evaluated lower than the pass-mark of 5.5 regarding more than two topics, they would be asked to make an appointment with the director of education in order to discuss the matter. If the evaluations turn out satisfactory overall, lecturers are not legally obliged, but are being “strongly encouraged” (Respondent 1) to take student feedback seriously and to consider the student-opinion when implementing changes to their courses.

All respondents said that the time in hours they spend for looking at the results of student feedback and for thinking about and implementing changes to their courses depends on a lot of factors and ranges from a few minutes to several hours.

When being asked how they would rate the costs that are implied by student feedback in relation to the value that they derive from it on a scale from 1 to 5, our respondents’ scores varied remarkably. Our first respondent gave a score of 2.5 out of 5, stating that the process is “very expensive indeed”. Our second respondent gave a score of 4, saying that the balance between costs and value is “definitely very good” and that it is “important to have regular feedback”. The third respondent did even give the maximum score of 5 out of 5. He acknowledges that some efforts are included also for the students, but thinks that “it’s worth it”. In his eyes the collection of student feedback is “crucial” and all efforts are only “a small price to pay for something that is quite valuable. The great differences in their scores are a clear indication that the body of academic staff within Public Administration hold a variety of opinions, which are not to be lumped together.

Another interesting indicator for determining academic staff’s perception of student feedback is the question whether they would collect student feedback if they did not have to do so. All of the respondents had the same opinion. They would definitely do so, and have already done so in the past. Which method to use in order to collect feedback remained contested amongst them: All of them mentioned the possibility of having informal sessions with students in order to get more detailed information about the quality of their courses, but they were aware that this method had its disadvantages, too. Results from such talks are not necessarily representative as they include only few students, and students might not be as courageous in expressing criticism - lacking the blanket of

anonymity that the survey-method grants them. In the end, one of the respondents said that he would prefer group discussions with students, under the prerequisite that students feel comfortable enough with the lecturer. Another respondent indicated that she does already use informal talks complementary to the standard survey questionnaire forms in order to get an additional insight in the strengths and weaknesses of her courses.

5.1.4 Student feedback and academic freedom

Power (2000) argues that the increasing use of collecting student feedback is an “ideologically driven system for disciplining and controlling doctors, teachers, university lecturers, and so on”. Ultimately, so Darbyshire (2007) claims, it is “not about quality, but about control and creating the illusion that all is well within an organisation sector”. Musselin (2013) adds to this that, while in the past academics enjoyed considerable freedom, recently a great reduction of their autonomy has taken place. Does this also apply to academic staff within Public Administration at the University of Twente?

Two of our respondents mentioned that the managerial purpose of student feedback does affect academic work and may even have an adverse effect on the quality of courses. Our first respondent is most explicit in his statements. He engages into the interesting dichotomy of “academic” or “lecturer” versus “employee” during the interview and claims that evaluation leads to “managerial dominance”. Evaluation, so he argues, gives “the manager a stick so that he can beat the employee”, or a “carrot” in order to shape his actions otherwise. It is thus a “tool for manipulation”. He fears, that if results become public, not only the management but also students can manipulate the lecturer. In his view, due to the pressure of trying to achieve high evaluation result, academic work suffers. Student feedback makes academics “way too vulnerable for having (...) a real lecture, that’s free, not a lecture in which you try to fulfil all sorts of” – as he calls the criteria used for the student feedback survey – “very debatable performance criteria”.

The second respondent is less direct in expressing her criticism. She states that it is a problem that many people do not know that the results from student feedback are used as a criteria for promotion, although she knows that it is recently also stated somewhere [see: University of Twente (n.d. (c)), Annex 2: Tenure Track Criteria]. She says that evaluation is an “instrument” that one has to be aware of why and what it is being used for. Academics, so she says, have to be careful not to engage into a “dog and pony show” for the sake of evaluation; they should be aware that blindly fulfilling evaluation criteria does not necessarily lead to a better quality of education.

We can conclude that academics within Public Administration at the University of Twente have different point of views on the managerial use of student feedback, but that they do nevertheless have a relatively positive perception of student feedback. Against the assumption that we derived from existing theory, academics think that students are capable of recognising the strengths and weaknesses of courses in most cases, and they acknowledge the value that feedback can provide to lecturers.

5.2 Does student feedback lead to quality improvement?

During the interviews, all respondents have agreed that one of the purposes of student feedback – and the primary purpose even – is to provide lecturers with information about the weaknesses and strengths of courses in order to give them a basis upon which they can evaluate and – if necessary – improve the quality of their teaching. But in how far does student feedback within Public Administration at the University of Twente allow for and lead to quality improvement?

5.2.1 The impact of student feedback on changes at the course-level

We operationalized quality improvement as *'changes that are being made to the content of a course or the teaching performance of the teacher of a course as a consequence of the suggestions of students'*. It is therefore crucial for the purpose of this paper to investigate in how far academic staff within Public Administration at the University of Twente make use of the suggestions they get from students via student feedback in order to implement changes to their courses.

During the interviews, all of our respondents claimed to have made at least minor changes to their courses on grounds of the results of student feedback. Our first respondent stated that he was never forced to change the organisation of his courses or his teaching style because of negative ratings, but that he nevertheless used comments received from students in order to improve small, organisational matters such as the number of seminars and assignments. If he sees a problem, he "[tries] to tackle it given the restraints that we [academic staff] face. Restraint is always there". Students, so he says, do for example always demand more feedback, while as a lecturer he does only have a limited capacity for providing this feedback as he does also have obligations additional to the one of teaching.

The second respondent said that she sometimes used feedback to make changes, depending on the nature of feedback. "Sometimes I recognize they are valid points, and sometimes they are just complaints about which I think, well I don't think they are relevant", she says. As examples of changes which she made because of the results of student feedback in the past she named changes in the way she offered feedback to students and an increased use of the virtual learning environment [Blackboard].

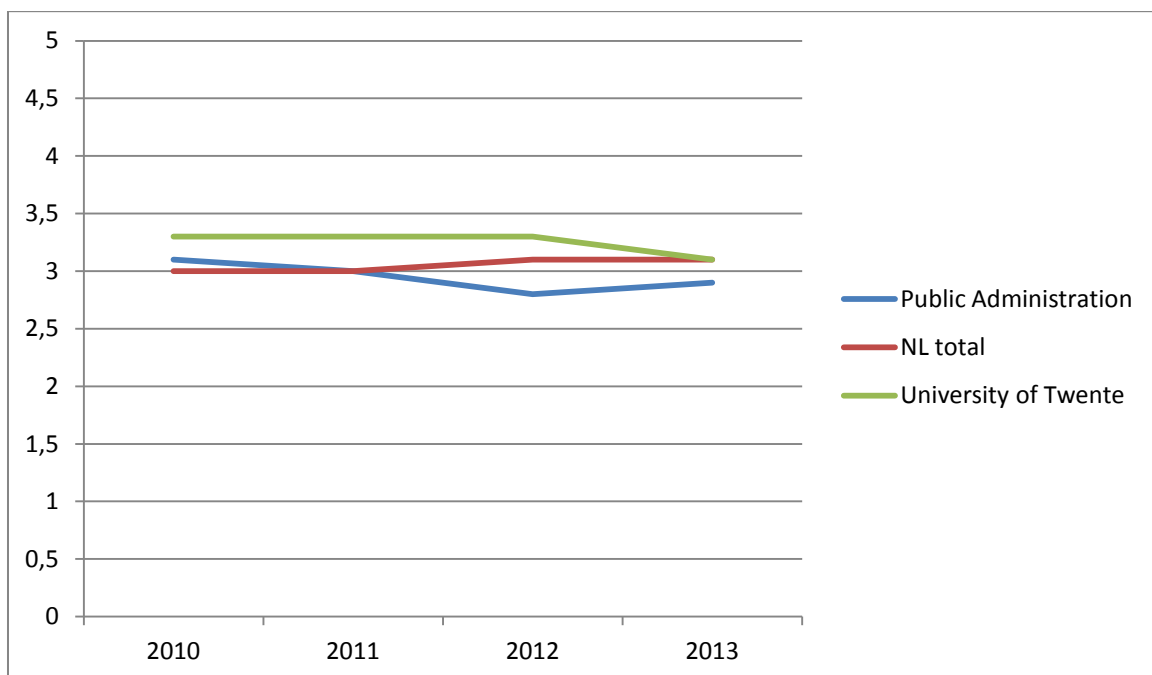
Our third respondent answered that student feedback would lead to changes "virtually always" in his case. He has changed the points of time for assignments and his course literature because of the feedback that he has received from students. For him, student feedback is especially important for being able to reflect on aspects of a course that have just been introduced, such as additional presentations.

If the results of student feedback are overall positive, academics within Public Administration are "encouraged" (Respondent 1), but not obliged to make changes. Nevertheless, all three respondents mentioned the possibility of managerial interference. If a course is evaluated badly and does receive ratings below 5.5 at average in more than two aspects, a lecturer will be asked to discuss the issue with the director of education. Therefore, we can expect that at least in all cases in which scores are insufficient, the results of student feedback will lead to changes for courses within Public Administration

5.2.2 Student satisfaction with the way in which feedback is used within their programme

All respondents of the sample of academic staff from Public Administration that have been interviewed claim that they do take feedback serious to a very high degree and that – if possible – they do use the indications from student feedback in order to define and to address the weak points of their courses. But how satisfied are students with the way in which feedback is used for quality improvement within Public Administration? Figure 3 indicates the satisfaction scores of students with the way in which their study-programme makes use of the results of student feedback, on a scale from 1 to 5.

Figure 3: The way in which the study-programme makes use of the results of student feedback [De wijze waarop je opleiding gebruik maakt van de uitkomsten van onderwijsbeoordelingen], scores on a scale from 1 to 5.



Source: Nationale Studenten Enquête (2010-2013)

Scores are sufficient, both at the national level as well as within the University of Twente. With scores of 3.3 in 2010, 2011 and 2012 and a slightly lower score of 3.1 in 2013, the degree of satisfaction for all studies at the University of Twente lies below the national average, which was 3.0 in 2010 and 2011 and increased to 3.1 in 2012 and 2013. The lowest scores can again be found for Public Administration. Students rated the way in which the results of their feedback are being used within their study-programme with 3.1 in 2010. This score decreased to 2.9 in 2011 and 2.8 in 2012 before slightly increasing again to 2.9 in 2013.

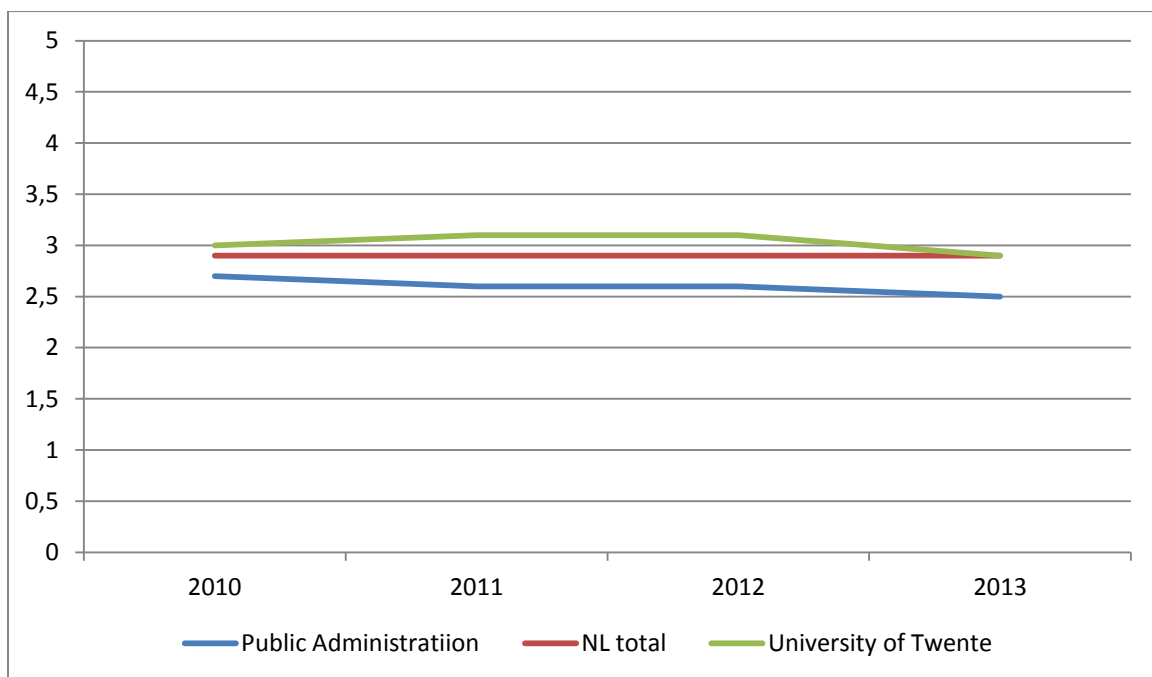
According to our theory, a possible reason for the sufficient, but still not very high level of satisfaction could be a lack of information about the results and outcomes of student feedback. The accessibility of the results of student feedback within Public Administration will be discussed in the following section.

5.2.3 The accessibility of the results of student feedback

Theory suggests that providing information about the results and consequences of their feedback to students is one of the crucial prerequisites to close the feedback-loop. If not informing students sufficiently, their motivations and subsequently the quality of their participation in the feedback process will suffer.

Our review of the existing guidelines and provisions about feedback has revealed that within the faculty of Management and Governance, information about the results of each course-evaluation is being publicly published on the website of the Opleidings Kwaliteit Commissie (OKC), the committee responsible for carrying out and coordinating student feedback (School of Management and Governance, 2012, Section D1). Nevertheless, it seems that both academic staff and students are not satisfied with the current situation. As Figure 3 shows, student-satisfaction in the Netherlands about the degree of information they receive about the results of their feedback is generally sufficient, although the satisfaction of students within Public Administration has reached the bottom line of 2.5 within the last 4 years.

Figure 3: The degree of information which students get about the results of student feedback [Informatie over de uitkomsten van onderwijsbeoordelingen], scores on a scale from 1 to 5.



Source: Nationale Studenten Enquête (2010-2013)

The national average score has remained constant at 2.9 out of 5 from 2010 to 2013. Students of the University of Twente are only slightly more positive. From 2010 to 2011 the satisfaction score increased from 3.0 to 3.1, but in 2013 satisfaction decreased again to a score of 2.9. Surprisingly, and despite the fact that within their faculty all results are being published, the lowest scores can be found amongst the students of Public Administration at the University of Twente. Their satisfaction has been indicated in the survey of the Nationale Studenten Enquête (NSE) with a score of 2.7 in 2010 and has decreased to 2.5 in 2013, which is still sufficient, but very low. We can therefore expect

that the information published on the Committees website is either qualitatively unsatisfactory, or that simply not enough students know that – and where- the information can be accessed.

The latter does also seem to be applicable for academic staff. One of the respondents did not know that results were published and was – in her words – “surprised” when being told so during the interview. In general, opinions about how and to whom the results of student feedback should be published differ among our respondents. One of the respondents is strongly opposed to publishing the results in any form other than to the lecturer himself, pointing to the danger of the emergence of “blame and shame mechanisms”. Publishing results, so he says, can have a huge impact on the reputation of lecturers. It might even give the lecturer an incentive to organise lectures according to the requirements of the “entirely biased” evaluation forms, to “please students”, flatter them, make him or herself likeable for example by “[making] an easy exam”, and all sorts of similar things, which he describes as “perverse effects”.

His colleagues do acknowledge the dangers that he sees. They state that the publishing of results can “damage you” and that academic staff has to be careful not to engage into a “dog and pony show for the sake of evaluation”, just in order to try to fulfil criteria and to get high scores. Nevertheless, they think that the results from student feedback should not be kept completely secret. One of them is of the opinion that students have a certain “right” of being informed about the results of student feedback for example if they are able to pick courses. The other respondent outlines the importance of informing students about the results and outcomes of student feedback. Being aware that students often “still don’t know what happens with the evaluations”, she suggests that instead of making the results public, but on a website “about which apparently no one knows”, they should be made available directly to the students of the cohort that filled in the evaluation forms. She does also mention an interesting strategy for involving students more directly into the process: Recently, academics at the faculty of Management and Governance seem to have presented not only the results of the evaluation from the previous year, but also their strategies for addressing the weak points of the course to the students of a new cohort, giving them “at least a bit of a clue what has been done and what has happened to the feedback of the previous year”.

Thus, we can state that academics take the results of student feedback into consideration. They implement changes to their courses if they see the need for it, and if improvement is necessary, the management level can interfere. The main problem we could define regarding student feedback within Public Administration is the question of accessibility. National and institutional guidelines require that the results of student feedback are being published – but not all academics are pleased with the dependency on evaluation scores. Additionally, the way in which results are published at the moment is questionable: students do not feel that they are being informed about the results of their feedback – and as they usually follow each course once only, they are not able to notice improvements to the quality of courses in other ways, either. The strategies introduced by our third respondent could be an excellent move towards an increasing involvement of students into the process of student feedback.

6. Conclusion

The present study was designed to investigate the role of student feedback in the process of internal quality assurance of Higher Education Institutions in the Netherlands. This part of the paper is dedicated to drawing a conclusion to this investigation. At first, we will revisit the most important expectations that emerged on grounds of the theoretical assumptions for the study. Afterwards, an answer to the three sub-questions, which have already been discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5, and finally also of our main research question will be provided. The chapter will be concluded by a reflection. The limitations of the study will be discussed and recommendations will be made for further research as well as for tackling certain problems within the process of student feedback in Public Administration at the University of Twente in the future.

6.1 Revisiting our expectations

Throughout this paper, we arrived at a number of expectations about the nature of the process of student feedback and the perceptions that academic staff and students do have about it. In the following we will revisit these expectations on the background of the information that we derived during the analysis of our results.

Academics, as the front-line actors, do ultimately determine the consequences of student feedback.

Newton (2000) claims that student feedback as a “genuine [form of] quality enhancement can only be fully sustained if it is premised on the energies and initiatives of frontline academics”. Even if (supra-)national and institutional regulations and frameworks exist – without the commitment of academic staff, real improvement of the quality of courses through student feedback is not likely to be achieved.

Our analysis shows that this assumption holds partly true. As long as the results of student feedback are sufficient, academics within Public Administration at the University of Twente are “encouraged” to use student feedback for improving the quality of their courses, but are not obliged to do so.

Nevertheless, pressure on academics to fulfil criteria is very high: If a course has received insufficient (below 5.5 average) scores in more than two aspects and there is thus an apparent need for quality improvement, the management can interfere. In such a case, academics will be obliged to discuss the matter and possible solutions with the director of education. Additionally, the results of student feedback are used as a promotion criteria, as for example in the Universities Tenure Track programme, where it is a prerequisite that candidates are “enthusiastic and effective” lecturers, “as demonstrated by student evaluations” (University of Twente, n.d. (c)). Leisyte (2007) introduced the notion of managerial demand as a “rule of game”, which academics have to comply to in order to ensure their survival. In our case, we can detect such tendencies, too: compliance to the criteria, which are induced by student feedback surveys, becomes part of the “rule of game– and academics have to play along in order to ensure their further, personal professional development.

The integrity of the feedback-loop is crucial for the effectiveness of student feedback.

Several authors (see for example Power, 2000; Brookes, 2003 and Harvey, 2003) outline the importance of the “integrity” of the feedback-“loop” (Power, 2000). Only if all stakeholders

participate in an adequate manner and if all required steps of the loop are followed, student feedback will be effective and can lead to an improvement of the quality of courses. In this paper we put a special focus on the two elements, which theory regards as the most common flaws within the feedback-loop, namely the implementation of changes to courses because of student feedback and the information that students receive about the consequences of their feedback.

We can conclude from the interview with members of academic staff that student feedback does lead to changes for courses in most of the cases. Our respondents indicated that only in few cases they could not tackle the weaknesses of a course as indicated by students, either because they faced external restraints or because they experienced a “conflict of expectations” (Respondent 1) between their own view and the student-opinion.

According to the Rules & Regulations that regulate student feedback within the Faculty of Management and Governance, the results of student feedback are being published on the website of the Opleidings Kwaliteit Commissie (OKC) for every single course. Apparently, however, students are not informed well enough about this and are not able to notice the changes that lecturers make for their courses either, given the fact that they usually follow each course once, only: Scores for the student-satisfaction with the degree of information that they get about the results of their feedback have been sufficient, but rather low within the last 4 years; they range from 2.5 to 2.7 out of 5.

Academics do often think that students are not capable of evaluating the quality of courses and fail to take student feedback serious.

If academic staff believe that students are not adequately trained to give feedback on the contents or methods of teaching, they are less likely to make changes to the content of their courses and to their style of teaching on basis of the findings derived from student feedback (Leckey & Neill, 2001; Powney & Hall, 1998). Moreover, the satisfaction of students with the way in which the outcomes of their feedback are being used is crucial for the functioning of the feedback-loop. If students have the feeling that their feedback does not lead to changes at the course-level, they are likely to retreat into a state of resignation (Harvey, 2003; Powney & Hall, 1998).

In the case of this study, this expectation does not hold true. Members of academic staff within Public Administration at the University of Twente do generally take the judgement of students seriously, with only small limitations: They do see certain restrictions to the capability of students to give feedback about the quality of courses in regard to a conflict of expectations between the academic – and the student-point-of-view and claim that sometimes, external or infrastructural factors can bias the results of student feedback. Nevertheless, they acknowledge student feedback as a valuable source of indication for the weaknesses and strengths of a course.

Academics think that the costs of student feedback are too high compared to its values.

Student feedback implies costs in terms of time and effort that are being put into the collection, analysis and processing of student feedback. Cost-effectiveness, however, is a very important aspect in determining the perceptions of academic staff towards student feedback (see for example: Finn et al, quoted in: Brookes, 2003; Harrisson, 2012).

While our study confirms that academics are aware of the high costs of student feedback, most of the members of academic staff within Public Administration at the University of Twente do still rate

the value of student feedback higher than its costs. Our respondents indicated the value of student feedback related to its costs with 2.5, 4 and 5 out of 5, which is very high. We can therefore reject this expectation.

Academics oppose to the managerial purpose of student feedback and engage into decoupling behaviour and other coping-strategies.

Leisyte (2007) states that academics are generally negative about increasing requirements of quality assurance. In order to ensure their survival, they engage into different, decoupling strategies to formally meet these requirements, while actual practices remain untouched by change. Student feedback would in this case become a “harmless ritual”, which does officially serve as a measure of internal quality assurance, but does not bear any consequences for the quality of courses (Power, 2002). As the increasing use of student feedback is a phenomenon of the increasing requirements of quality assurance, we expected to encounter at least some degree of rejection towards student feedback among the members of academic staff that we interviewed. This is however not the case.

The evidence from this study suggests that most of the academics criticise the managerial purpose of student feedback, but that they do nevertheless not engage into decoupling behaviour or other coping-strategies concerning student feedback directly. This might be the case because they acknowledge that student feedback goes beyond the managerial purpose and can be useful in other ways too.

6.2 Answer to the Research Question

In order to be able to answer our main research question, we will first have to revisit our three sub-questions, which have already been dealt with in detail in chapters 4 and 5:

1. How do (supra-)national and institutional guidelines and regulations define the contribution of student feedback to the internal Quality Assurance of institutions of Higher Education and what is the role of academics in this process?

As the analysis of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the strategy of the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO) and institutional provisions in Chapter 4 of this paper shows, the organisation of student feedback at the course-level is determined on different policy levels. Our analysis revealed a hierarchy in these policy levels. The strategies of national associations for accreditation and quality assurance are shaped by the European standards and guidelines; institutional provisions once again depend on the requirements of these national associations.

Hereby it has to be mentioned that on the European level, existing standards, guidelines and strategies do not set implicit rules about student feedback. They require clear policies and rules about internal quality assurance as well as the inclusion of students into the procedure of internal quality assurance. On the national level, accreditation criteria by the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO) define that Institutions have to assess the satisfaction of students and staff in the process of self-reflection. Ultimately, universities have to decide how to organise student feedback and how to fulfil these requirements at their own discretion.

The role of academics in the process of student feedback is not precisely defined. Institutional documents from the University of Twente do however describe the academic as the “essential figure in the evaluation process”, bearing a responsibility which is an “essential prerequisite of improvement”.

II. How do academics perceive student feedback?

We expected the perception of academics depends largely on what they regard as the purpose of student feedback, in how far they regard students as capable of giving feedback, and how they perceive the costs and values of student feedback.

After the analysis of our data we can conclude that, in general, academics within Public Administration at the University of Twente have a positive perception of student feedback. In contrast to what theories by Leckey & Neill (2001), Powney & Hall (1998) and others suggest, academics within public Administration see only small limitations to the capability of students to give adequate feedback, and do nevertheless regard their judgement concerning the strengths and weaknesses of a course as useful. They acknowledge that the costs in terms of time and effort spend on collecting and processing student feedback are high, but most of them think that the value of student feedback is relatively higher than its costs. In line with what Leisyte (2007) suggests about academic restriction towards increasing requirements of quality assurance, we can now conclude that most of the academics within Public Administration oppose the use of the results of student feedback for managerial purposes, but they do nevertheless think that in its original purpose – information for the lecturer and quality improvement – student feedback is very important. One of the best indicators for the relatively positive perceptions of academic staff about student feedback is the fact that they would definitely also collect student feedback if they were not required to do so.

III. To what extent do academics use student feedback for quality improvement at the course level?

All respondents indicated that they have implemented at least minor changes to their courses because of the feedback they received from students. Sometimes, academics are not able to use student feedback: They may face external restraints, imposed on them for example by obligations other than teaching, which make it impossible to spend more time on providing feedback, or they may recognize a conflict of expectations between what they as academics on the one hand, and students on the other hand expect. In most of the cases however, these expectations seem to be reconcilable, and academics claim that they tackle problems that are being indicated by student feedback whenever they can. Students are generally satisfied with the way in which their feedback is being used within Public Administration, but nevertheless there remains capacity for improvement: scores from the NSE ranged from 2.8 to 3.1 out of 5.

Our main Research question was:

What is the role of student feedback in the process of internal Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions in the Netherlands?

Our analysis has revealed the huge importance of institutional guidelines for determining the process of student feedback. Therefore we cannot generalize our findings for other institutions in the Netherlands. On grounds of our study, it is now possible to state that we have found evidence that

student feedback plays at least two different roles in the process of internal quality assurance within Public Administration at the University of Twente:

1) On the one hand it serves the original purpose of informing academics about the strengths and weaknesses of their courses and facilitates quality improvement. Theory suggests that the effectiveness of this role does however depend highly on the motivations and perceptions of academics (Mintzberg, 1979; Newton, 2000; and others). We can conclude that this is partly true. Academics play an important role in the process of student-feedback by providing information about their courses, developing survey-questions and handing out the survey forms. Additionally, they are the ones to determine possible changes to their courses. If, however, scores are too low and the need for improvement is inevitable, the management level can interfere.

2) On the other hand, student feedback serves as a managerial tool. It facilitates the role of the university as an emerging corporate service industry and its core-principles of customer protection and customer satisfaction and it does help to fulfil the increasing, external criteria of quality assurance, which derive both from the European and from the national level. According to literature, the increase in evaluation and monitoring has led to a great reduction of academic autonomy (Musselin, 2013) and to changing working environment for academics (Leisyte, 2007). Our study confirms this assumption: Academics within Public Administration at the University of Twente are aware of managerial expectations and the pressures they imply for them, and currently, their performance according to the evaluation by students is also a promotion criteria.

6.3 Reflection and further research

Several limitations to this pilot study need to be acknowledged. We took into consideration the process of student feedback within one study-programme at one single, Dutch university only. Therefore, as typical for case-studies, the results are valuable for the very setting they have been created for, but might not be generalisable to other study-programmes. Especially a comparison with student feedback within study-programmes at different institutions and in different countries will be difficult, partly also because “(seemingly) identical quality assurance procedures” can nevertheless vary in their impacts, depending on a wider, institutional context (Westerheijden, 1999). Additionally, the sample size of academic staff for the interview was very small. For representative results, more respondents will have to be accessed.

The main weakness of this study is probably the paucity of information about the opinion of students. The data from the Nationale Studenten Enquête can provide only intermediating insights and – as already outlined in our methodology chapter, it has to be regarded as an indication rather than a fully representative data source. If the debate is to be moved forward, a deeper understanding of the role, motivations and perceptions of students for the process of student feedback needs to be developed. This could be done by semi-structured interviews, although a survey with a high response rate would be preferable.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that student feedback plays an important role in the process of internal quality assurance and that, although uttering small limitations, academics within Public Administration at the University of Twente have a generally very positive perception of

student feedback and do often use student feedback for improving the quality of their courses. Nevertheless, the satisfaction of students with the way in which evaluations are carried out, the way in which they are being informed about the results of feedback and the way in which their feedback is being used within Public Administration is highly insufficient. Apparently, neither enough academics nor enough students know that the results of student feedback for each course are publicly available via the internet. In the future, there is, therefore, a definite need for a better communication of the results and outcomes of student feedback.

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III. Appendix

1. Interview Questions

1. What is your position at MB Faculty and how long have you been in this position? What main responsibilities do you have in this position?
2. Which courses have you taught during the time of your employment? Which of them changed significantly in your eyes? Why?
3. How do you evaluate your teaching?
4. How is your teaching evaluated at the faculty? Who carries out the evaluation and in what form?

As a follow up if student feedback is not mentioned- Why is student feedback collected within the Public Administration programme?

5. What would you say is the purpose of student feedback?
6. In the case of course evaluations by students – who initiates the collection of the student feedback? How much are you involved in this process?
7. How is student feedback via course evaluations used within Public Administration programme? How effective is it in your view?
8. How much time do you spend on average looking at the results of student feedback for one of your courses? Please give an example.
9. What is the effect of the results of student feedback for the courses you teach? Could you please provide some examples of changes (if any) which were inspired by student feedback which you implemented in your courses? [e.g. Changes concerning assignments/examinations, course content, ...]
10. How would you rate the capability of students to evaluate the quality of the courses you teach on a scale from 1 to 5, one being the lowest and 5 being the highest?

Could you explain your answer?

11. How would you rate the value of student feedback in relation to its costs, for example the time efforts that are connected to analysing the results and making changes to courses on a scale from 1 to 5?
12. At the moment, a short summary of each course evaluation from the faculty of Management and Governance can be found on the university's website. For whom should the results be made available in your opinion? [Should they be available at all, should they be made available for all students or the students of the very course that they concern?]

Taking all this into consideration:

13. If you had to decide yourself whether student feedback should be collected for your courses, what would you decide and why?
14. Looking back at the last three study-years, what kind of changes have you experienced in the way in which student feedback within Public Administration has been collected and processed?
15. Is there anything else you would like to reflect on regarding the usefulness of the student feedback mechanisms as they are currently organized at the MB faculty?

2. Information on the type of standard question asked in evaluation surveys for courses within Public Administration in 2011/12 (University of Twente, n.d. (d))

(1) [Closed questions, answers usually on a scale from 1 to 10]

Workload

- h spent on the course/week
- Number of attended lectures

General evaluation

- Content of the course
- Level of the course
- Consistency with other courses
- Clarity of learning objectives
- Achievement of learning objectives
- Assessment of learning objectives

Organization of the course

- Relevance of information on Blackboard
- Clarity of structure
- Consistency between lectures and readings
- Up-to-date material
- Suitability of location

Lecturer's performance

- Enthusiasm
- Clear explanation of the subject
- Ability to keep attention
- Problem solving ability
- Level of English

Lectures

- Lectures were interesting
- Lectures helps with difficult topics
- Lectures were useful for study material

Assignments

- Feedback was helpful to improve assignments
- Assignments were useful for application of theory of methods
- I learned a lot
- Good collaboration in group assignments

Examination

- Evaluation criteria were clear
- Examination form suits used teaching forms
- Level of exam is appropriate for the level of the course

Final assessment

- Overall evaluation of course

(2) [Open questions: strengths and weaknesses of the course]