

Summary of Research Findings on Student Engagement in Quality Assurance (2023-2024)

Abstract

This study examines the role and significance of student engagement in quality assurance in higher education, focusing on the Japanese context. While such engagement is well established in Europe and other regions, its implementation in Japan remains limited and underdeveloped. The research adopts a multi-layered approach combining theoretical analysis, a questionnaire survey and interviews of Japanese universities, and international comparative research. Student engagement is broadly defined to include both direct involvement in internal and external quality assurance processes and indirect forms such as surveys and dialogue. The findings indicate that, although many universities have mechanisms to collect student feedback, collaborative forms of student engagement in quality assurance are still limited. Key challenges include low awareness among institutional leadership and staff, a lack of reference models, insufficient policy and financial support, and limited trust between students and staff. At the same time, effective student engagement is shown to contribute to improvements in educational quality, institutional learning, and student development. Based on these findings, the study highlights the need to develop a context-sensitive model suited to Japanese higher education, emphasizing gradual implementation, shared understanding, and stakeholder collaboration.

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2. Background and Objectives

2.1. Background

In recent years, student engagement has attracted growing attention as an essential component of quality assurance in higher education. This development is closely linked to broader shifts toward student-centered learning, increased accountability, and the demand for greater transparency in higher education systems. In particular, in Europe, students are recognized not merely as recipients of education but as active partners in shaping educational processes and institutional governance. They participate in decision-making bodies, internal quality assurance activities, and external review processes, often with rights and responsibilities comparable to those of academic staff and other stakeholders.

In contrast, in Japan, student engagement in quality assurance remains relatively limited in both scope and depth. While mechanisms to collect student feedback are widely established, more direct and collaborative forms of engagement remain underdeveloped. Furthermore, systematic discussions on the role, significance, and potential of student engagement have not been sufficiently advanced at the institutional or national level.

At the same time, the diversification of higher education and the increasing emphasis on learning outcomes have highlighted the importance of incorporating the perspectives of students as primary stakeholders. Students, as active agents in the learning process, are uniquely positioned to provide insights into the effectiveness of educational practices and learning environments. In this context, reconsidering the role of student engagement is essential for enhancing the effectiveness and credibility of quality assurance in Japan.

2.2. Objectives

Against this background, this study aims to examine the current state and challenges of student engagement in quality assurance in Japan and to explore approaches that are appropriate to its higher education context.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- to clarify the forms, scope, and characteristics of student engagement in both internal and external quality assurance processes;
- to identify key challenges and bottlenecks that hinder the effective implementation of student engagement;

- to analyze the significance of student engagement for higher education institutions, students themselves, and quality assurance processes, including its potential contribution to institutional learning and student development; and
- to propose approaches suited to the Japanese higher education context, along with directions for their implementation.

Through these objectives, the study seeks not only to describe the current situation but also to provide a foundation for promoting student engagement as an integral element of quality assurance in Japanese higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Analysis

This study adopts a multi-layered approach combining theoretical analysis, empirical investigation, and international comparative research. The findings from these components are analyzed in an integrated manner, with attention to both cross-cutting patterns and context-specific variations. The following sections outline each component of the methodology.

The theoretical component examines the background and rationale for student engagement in higher education. It reviews relevant developments in higher education policy and explores how students have been positioned in different contexts, including as political actors, economic actors, and agents of learning.

In addition, the study draws on perspectives such as organizational learning and student-centered learning to analyze the potential contributions of student engagement to both institutional improvement and student development. This theoretical framework provides the basis for interpreting the empirical findings.

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey was conducted targeting universities across Japan. The survey was distributed by post to 785 national, public, and private universities.

The survey was administered through a web-based response system during the period from October 24 to November 27, 2023. Requests for responses were directed to departments and units responsible for educational improvement, academic planning, or quality assurance, in order to ensure that the information provided reflected actual institutional practices.

The questionnaire consisted of eight items, including both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, designed to capture the current status, practices, and challenges of student engagement in internal quality assurance. In this study, student engagement is broadly defined to include both direct and indirect forms of involvement in quality assurance processes. Direct forms include participation in institutional committees, curriculum review, and self-assessment activities, while indirect forms include mechanisms such as surveys, focus groups, and structured dialogue. The scope of the study encompasses engagement in both internal quality assurance (IQA) within institutions and external quality assurance (EQA) activities conducted by accreditation bodies.

The survey was guided by the following three research questions:

- What types of student actors (e.g., individual students or members of student organizations) are involved in internal quality assurance?
- What kinds of educational improvements have resulted from student engagement?
- What bottlenecks hinder the implementation and operation of student engagement?

A total of 397 universities responded to the survey, yielding an overall response rate of 50.6%. Table 1 summarizes the number of institutions surveyed and the responses received by institutional type (national, public, and private universities).

Table 1. Survey Distribution and Response Rate

Category	Total	National	Public	Private
Universities Surveyed	785	82	97	606
Responses Received	397	52	48	297
Response Rate	50.6%	63.4%	49.5%	49.0%

3.3. Interview Survey

A semi-structured interview survey was conducted to complement the findings of the questionnaire and to provide deeper insights into the practices and experiences of student engagement in internal quality assurance.

The interviews targeted a purposive sample of universities selected from among those that responded to the questionnaire survey. A total of 10 universities, representing different institutional types (national and private) and varying forms of student engagement practices, were included in the interviews with academic and administrative staff members. The interviews

were carried out either in person or online.

The staff interviews focused on the following key themes:

- institutional initiatives involving collaboration between students and staff;
- organizational structures and support mechanisms for student-staff collaboration;
- outcomes of such collaboration and criteria used to evaluate their effectiveness;
- approaches to facilitating student engagement, particularly in relation to educational improvement; and
- future perspectives on student engagement in internal quality assurance.

In addition, student interviews were conducted at four of the institutions where staff interviews had taken place. These interviews targeted students who were actively involved in quality assurance-related activities and were conducted online.

The student interviews addressed the following themes:

- motivations for participating in quality assurance-related activities;
- perceived benefits of participation and its impact on their learning;
- experiences in proposing or contributing to educational improvements;
- awareness of institutional self-assessment and evaluation processes; and
- perspectives on feasible forms of student-staff collaboration for enhancing education and research.

The qualitative data obtained from both staff and student interviews were analyzed to identify key themes, patterns, and contextual factors related to the implementation and impact of student engagement.

3.4. International Comparative Research

An international comparative study was conducted to situate the Japanese context within broader global developments.

This component included:

- document-based analysis of accreditation standards and guidelines published by six U.S. regional accreditation bodies, supplemented by a questionnaire survey and interview with selected agencies;
- document-based research on student engagement in Europe (including Sweden), Australia, and New Zealand; and

- a questionnaire survey of quality assurance agencies in the Asian region.

The analysis focused on key dimensions such as the roles assigned to students, the degree of formalization, and the stages of quality assurance processes in which students are involved.

By examining these dimensions across different regions, the study identifies diverse models of student engagement and extracts implications for the development of context-appropriate approaches in Japan.

4. Analysis

4.1. Conceptual Foundations of Student Engagement

The analysis begins with a theoretical framework that explains why student engagement contributes to quality assurance. At its core, student engagement generates two interrelated forms of learning: student learning and institutional learning.

First, the student learning emerges when students engage as active agents in educational and organizational processes. Rather than being passive recipients, students participate in various forms of academic and institutional activities, including learning processes, peer support, and quality assurance practices. Through such engagement, they develop their understanding of curricula and teaching methods and enhance skills such as self-regulation, critical thinking, and evidence-based reasoning.

Second, institutional learning arises when student perspectives are incorporated into institutional processes in a way that allows them to be critically examined and publicly validated. Such participation enables universities to obtain authentic feedback from those directly engaged in learning processes, thereby strengthening organizational learning and supporting continuous improvement in educational quality.

From this perspective, student engagement functions not only as a mechanism for gathering feedback but also as a process through which both students and institutions learn and improve.

4.2. Patterns of Student Engagement in Japan

The analysis of survey and interview data reveals that student engagement in Japan remains predominantly indirect and consultative. This pattern constitutes a defining characteristic of the current Japanese context. Mechanisms such as course evaluation surveys and student

experience surveys are widely implemented across institutions. In addition, a significant proportion of universities have established student organizations or representative bodies that aggregate student opinions and serve as intermediaries between students and institutional actors. In fact, approximately 80% of responding universities reported having such organizational structures, indicating that basic institutional mechanisms for hearing student voices are relatively well developed.

However, these forms of engagement are primarily limited to the collection and transmission of student feedback, and more direct and collaborative forms of participation, in which students and staff jointly engage in quality assurance processes, remain underdeveloped. Activities such as student involvement in curriculum design, program evaluation, or the co-creation of evaluative reports are rarely observed. This suggests that student engagement has not yet fully evolved from consultative mechanisms to more substantive and collaborative engagement.

At the same time, institutions that have actively incorporated more direct forms of student engagement report a range of positive outcomes. These include increased motivation toward teaching and learning among both students and faculty, a stronger sense of partnership and solidarity between students and staff, and a heightened shared commitment to educational improvement. These findings indicate that, while still limited in prevalence, more engaged forms of student engagement can generate meaningful benefits for both individuals and institutions.

Insights from student interviews further highlight the significance of student engagement from the learners' perspective. Students reported diverse motivations for participation, including opportunities for self-development, skills enhancement, and engagement in activities that are not typically available in regular academic settings. Participation was also associated with changes in students' awareness, as they developed a deeper understanding of educational processes and their own roles within them. In addition, students recognized the benefits of collaborative activities with peers and staff, particularly through practical tasks such as document preparation and joint discussions, which contributed to their learning and personal growth.

4.3. Identified Bottlenecks

The analysis identifies several key bottlenecks that hinder the development of student engagement in quality assurance in Japan. These include:

- Limited awareness and commitment among institutional leadership and staff
- Lack of practical models and shared knowledge on effective engagement

- Insufficient policy and financial support at the national level
- Perceived limitations in students' capacity and motivation
- A lack of trust between students and staff

In addition to these structural and cultural factors, a cross-cutting issue identified in the analysis is the lack of a shared understanding of the significance and value of student engagement. In some institutions, student engagement is not yet fully recognized as an integral component of quality assurance, which limits efforts to develop more meaningful forms of engagement.

A central challenge emerging from the findings is how to effectively translate student feedback into concrete educational improvements and how to establish collaborative processes through which students and staff can jointly contribute to quality enhancement. While many institutions have mechanisms for collecting student opinions, the processes for utilizing these inputs in a systematic and impactful manner remain underdeveloped. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing student engagement beyond consultation toward more substantive and co-creative forms of engagement.

4.4. Insights from International Practices

Comparative analysis of international cases reveals diverse models of student engagement, shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

In Europe, particularly in countries such as Sweden, students are positioned as equal partners in governance and quality assurance, with formal rights to participate in decision-making processes. This model is underpinned by a long-standing tradition of participatory governance, in which students are regarded as integral members of the academic community. However, such arrangements are rooted in specific historical and social contexts and cannot be easily transferred to other systems.

In the United States, student engagement is widely embedded in quality assurance processes, although typically in indirect forms. Students are not usually involved as evaluators in accreditation decisions, but their input is systematically incorporated through surveys, interviews, and institutional processes. Notably, emphasis is placed on enabling students to understand quality assurance frameworks, thereby supporting informed and meaningful participation.

In other regions, including Asia and Oceania, there is a growing trend toward more direct forms of student engagement. In some cases, students serve as members of external review panels or

contribute to the development of evaluation frameworks. At the same time, many systems are adopting a gradual approach, introducing student engagement in stages while addressing practical challenges such as training, role definition, and the provision of appropriate support.

These international perspectives highlight the diversity of student engagement practices and underscore the importance of aligning approaches with national and institutional contexts.

5. Key Findings

The study yields the following key findings regarding student engagement in quality assurance:

(1) Student engagement remains predominantly indirect in Japan

Although feedback mechanisms are widely established, direct and collaborative forms of engagement remain limited.

(2) Institutional structures for hearing student voices are relatively well developed

Many universities have established student organizations or representative bodies that function as intermediaries between students and institutional actors. A large proportion of institutions maintain such structures, suggesting that foundational mechanisms for aggregating and communicating student perspectives are in place.

(3) Effective practices demonstrate clear positive impacts

Institutions that actively engage students in quality assurance report enhanced motivation toward teaching and learning among both students and staff, stronger relationships and a sense of partnership between stakeholders, and increased shared commitment to educational improvement.

(4) Student perspectives highlight the developmental value of engagement

Student interviews indicate that participation is motivated by opportunities for self-development and engagement in meaningful activities beyond regular coursework. Students also report increased awareness of educational processes and recognize the benefits of collaborative work with peers and staff.

(5) A transition from consultation to co-creation remains a major challenge

While student engagement is widely practiced in indirect forms, it has not yet sufficiently developed into collaborative engagement in which students and staff jointly design, implement, and evaluate educational practices. A key issue lies in the limited capacity of institutions to

translate student feedback into concrete improvements and to establish sustainable collaborative processes.

(6) Multiple structural and cultural bottlenecks persist

Key obstacles include limited awareness among institutional actors, lack of practical models, insufficient policy support, and a deficit of mutual trust between students and staff.

(7) Student engagement contributes to both institutional improvement and student development

Engagement not only enhances the quality of education through more authentic feedback but also fosters students' skills, perspectives, and capacity for engagement.

(8) International practices highlight diverse and context-dependent models of student engagement

Comparative analysis shows that student engagement is institutionalized in various forms globally, ranging from indirect feedback mechanisms to direct involvement in governance and external review. These models are shaped by historical, cultural, and policy contexts, and cannot be uniformly applied across systems.

(9) A context-sensitive approach is essential for Japan

Rather than adopting external models wholesale, it is important to develop approaches that align with Japan's higher education context. Incremental implementation, starting from feasible forms of engagement, may provide a practical pathway toward more substantive and collaborative practices.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the role and potential of student engagement in quality assurance through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical investigation. While mechanisms for collecting student feedback are relatively widespread in Japan, further development is needed to integrate student engagement more fully into quality assurance processes.

The findings indicate that student engagement contributes to quality assurance by supporting both student learning and institutional learning, as discussed in Section 5.1.

At the same time, the study identifies several structural and cultural challenges, including limited

awareness among institutional leaders and staff, insufficient shared understanding of the value of student engagement, and a lack of sustainable models suited to the Japanese context. Addressing these challenges requires a gradual and context-sensitive approach rather than the direct adoption of external models.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that the development of a “Japanese model” of student engagement is essential. Such a model should be embedded in institutional practices, aligned with internal and external quality assurance processes, and designed to support both educational improvement and student development. Continuous efforts to promote shared understanding, enhance transparency, and strengthen collaboration among stakeholders will be critical to advancing student engagement as a meaningful and sustainable component of quality assurance, supported by a gradual and context-sensitive approach.