

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AT AZERBAIJAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Ph.D. L.Y Kengerlinskiy

Quality Assurance Department,
Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University,
Baku, Azerbaijan
lkengerli02@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of student involvement in quality assurance across Azerbaijan's universities, focusing on the shift from symbolic participation to more meaningful partnership. Recent reforms, aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and supported by the Education Quality Assurance Agency of Azerbaijan (TKTA), have introduced internal QA units, systematic surveys, and strengthened accreditation processes. Yet, student engagement remains uneven, as traditional governance cultures, limited awareness, and inconsistent institutional practices continue to narrow students' influence on teaching, curriculum design, and decision-making.

Despite these challenges, early progress is evident. Students now participate in program committees, accreditation self-assessments, and curriculum discussions – an emerging acknowledgement that their academic experience offers valuable insight into educational quality. Moving toward genuine partnership, however, will require sustained capacity building, clearer communication about how feedback is used, and a culture that consistently views students as co-creators rather than passive participants.

To contextualize these developments, the article draws on examples from ADA University (Azerbaijan), the University of Tartu (Estonia), and Lund University (Sweden). ADA's "You said – We did" model illustrates how visible responsiveness can build trust; Tartu's digital feedback systems and training initiatives show how supportive infrastructure strengthens student voice; and Lund demonstrates what mature partnership looks like when students are fully integrated into governance structures. Together, these cases offer Azerbaijani HEIs a concise and practical roadmap for advancing from consultation toward authentic student partnership in QA.

Keywords: quality assurance, student involvement, Azerbaijan, higher education, Bologna Process, ESG.

Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education has become central to maintaining academic standards, ensuring accountability, and promoting continuous improvement in a globalized context. Student involvement is a crucial, though often underutilized, component of effective QA. Instead of being a procedural formality, student involvement reflects a significant philosophical change toward democratic governance, shared responsibility, and a student-centered approach to learning. This imperative has been reinforced by the Bologna Process and codified in the ESG (ENQA, 2015), which advocate for inclusive approaches that recognize students as full partners. In many European systems, students now participate in strategic decision-making, program evaluation, review panels, and the design of feedback mechanisms. As the European Students' Union (ESU) has stated (ESU, 2015), students should be fully involved in defining QA policies and systems. Liz Thomas (Thomas, L., 2012) also argues that fostering student engagement and a sense of belonging is critical for improving retention and overall student success in higher education.

Student participation in QA in Azerbaijan is steadily progressing, reflecting the country's ongoing commitment to Bologna reforms and European standards since 2005. Mechanisms such as councils and surveys provide promising avenues for engagement, and initiatives to enhance training and support are strengthening their impact. While hierarchical traditions and limited awareness of QA among some students continue to pose challenges, the rise of independent representation points to increasingly meaningful involvement. A gap remains between the formal adoption of European standards and fully realized student influence, indicating room for further growth.

This article addresses that gap and highlights the systemic challenges that limit meaningful student participation in Azerbaijan's HEIs. The analysis utilizes a conceptual framework that tracks the evolution of student involvement, classifying students' roles as clients, participants, and, eventually, partners. It then situates Azerbaijan's experience within the wider European context, acknowledging that even mature systems often struggle to move beyond symbolic engagement. Importantly, the article draws comparative lessons from three institutions – ADA University, the University of Tartu, and Lund University – to inform a phased roadmap for Azerbaijan's institutions. By synthesizing these insights, the paper proposes practical recommendations: formalizing representation and transparent feedback (as seen at ADA), expanding capacity building and decision-making rights (as in Tartu), and ultimately embedding partnership as a cultural norm (as at Lund).

Aim

The aim of this study is to support a significant transition in Azerbaijan’s HEIs toward inclusive governance, with particular emphasis on enhancing meaningful student involvement in quality assurance and strategic decision-making. In doing so, the article aligns with both national aspirations for quality improvement and the European Higher Education Area’s (EHEA) emphasis on harmonized, student-centered systems. Ultimately, it argues that empowering students as genuine partners in QA enhances educational quality, institutional governance, and trust between universities and their communities.

Significance

The significance of this article is that it offers a critical examination and practical roadmap for advancing student involvement in QA within Azerbaijan’s HEIs. The study makes several key contributions across research and practice, focusing specifically on how HEIs can transition from symbolic consultation to authentic partnership. This article's main contributions begin with its conceptual alignment and gap analysis. It applies a three-stage framework (students as clients, participants, and partners) to the national context, grounding its analysis in the ESG and the Bologna Process. This is crucial for highlighting the persistent gap between the formal adoption of European standards since 2005 and the actual, meaningful influence students exert in decision-making and governance.

Furthermore, the study provides valuable empirical and comparative benchmarking to inform national practice. It draws tailored, comparative lessons from institutions that represent a continuum of engagement models: ADA University (a national example of structured participation and transparent feedback), the University of Tartu (a post-Soviet case of successful transition to co-governance), and Lund University (an advanced model of full partnership). These cases offer Azerbaijani HEIs a concise, practical roadmap for strengthening their QA systems. The article's primary contribution is the proposed phased strategic roadmap for advancing student partnership across Azerbaijani HEIs. This roadmap details steps to formalize representation and transparent feedback, expand capacity building and voting rights, and ultimately embed co-creation as a cultural norm. Ultimately, the study argues that empowering students as genuine partners enhances educational quality, governance, and trust, aligning Azerbaijani HEIs with both national aspirations and EHEA principles.

Theoretical Framework: Evolution of QA and Student Involvement

Quality assurance in higher education became prominent in the late twentieth century due to rising demands for accountability, transparency, and competitiveness. Initially, QA focused on self-regulation and peer review, but it has since shifted toward enhancement-led approaches that stress continuous improvement and robust stakeholder participation. This shift was significantly accelerated by the Bologna Process (1999). The process introduced the ESG (first published in 2005, revised in 2015). The ESG emphasizes that students are indispensable stakeholders. It frames student participation not merely as an optional consultation but as central to achieving a sustainable quality culture. This culture encompasses key areas such as governance, program design, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms.

The movement of students from passive recipients to recognized partners mirrors broader changes in institutional governance. Key international milestones formalized this progression:

- Bologna Declaration (1999): Introduced the principle of student-centered learning;
- Prague Communiqué (2001): Recognized students as essential partners;
- Berlin Communiqué (2003): Called for active student involvement in QA processes;
- ESG (2005, 2015): Formally established students as key stakeholders.

Bovill et al. (Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P., 2011) analyzed student participation in higher education processes, outlining its progression across three distinct stages:

Stage	Student Role	Characteristics
Consultative	Students as Clients	Treated as consumers, providing feedback primarily through surveys. Influence is limited and transparency is weak, often reflecting the marketization of higher education
Collaborative	Students as Participants	Students join committees and QA activities, contributing ideas and learning institutional processes. This marks progress, but most decision-making remains with the institutional leadership.

Full Partnership	Students as Co-Governors	Students share responsibility with staff, actively co-creating policies and curricula. Representatives hold voting rights and exert direct influence on institutional matters
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This three-stage progression illustrates the pathway institutions can take to move beyond tokenism toward empowerment, embedding student perspectives at the core of development and aligning with global best practices. To systematically assess the quality and depth of student involvement, four crucial dimensions are considered (Guilbault, M., 2018):

Representation and Participation: This dimension examines the integration of students into governance structures and QA committees, focusing on ensuring they have meaningful roles and genuine influence.

Feedback and Evaluation: This refers to the presence of structured mechanisms for collecting and, critically, acting upon student input regarding teaching, curricula, and services.

Capacity Building: This addresses the need for providing adequate training and support to equip students to engage effectively and knowledgeably in complex QA processes.

Culture of Partnership: This dimension reflects the overarching institutional ethos that views and treats students as co-creators of the educational experience rather than as passive recipients of instruction.

Literature Review: Student Participation —Azerbaijan in Global Context

Student involvement in QA across Azerbaijan’s higher education institutions (HEIs) has been evolving gradually, reflecting both emerging progress and persistent constraints. Although students are formally recognized as stakeholders in internal QA systems, their participation often remains procedural, concentrated primarily in course evaluations, with limited influence on curriculum, assessment policies, or institutional decision-making (Logermann, F., & Leišytė, L., 2015). Still, incremental advancements are visible. Some Azerbaijani universities are beginning to move beyond a consumer-oriented model and experiment with more participatory governance structures. These efforts—though uneven—signal an emerging willingness to strengthen student voice and align with European standards for collaborative QA (Klemenčič, M., 2014).

International literature shows that Azerbaijan’s challenges are not unique. Across the European Higher Education Area, student engagement often remains shallow despite established frameworks. Research by Logermann and Leišytė ((Logermann, F., & Leišytė, L., 2015) suggests that even with established participatory structures, student engagement often remains superficial or symbolic consultation, positioning students as advisors rather than as key decision-makers. Klemenčič (Klemenčič, M., 2014) also noted the disparity between students' formal representation and their actual influence, pointing out that power imbalances and ineffective feedback mechanisms frequently weaken their engagement. Westerheijden et al (Westerheijden, D. F., Stensaker, B., & Rosa, M. J. (Eds.), 2007) also note that QA reforms across Europe tend to prioritize compliance and procedural alignment, sometimes at the expense of genuine stakeholder involvement.

Bergan and Deca (Bergan, S., & Deca, L., 2018) describe this uneven implementation of Bologna reforms as a “two-speed” process: while some institutions advance participatory governance, others lag due to centralization, resource limitations, or insufficient autonomy. Azerbaijan’s trajectory is further shaped by historical and geopolitical factors. The Soviet legacy continues to reinforce hierarchical structures that limit student agency, while decades of territorial occupation disrupted institutional development and slowed the adoption of participatory governance practices⁸⁵. Consequently, student participation in QA within Azerbaijani HEIs continues to evolve gradually, mirroring global patterns of both progress and persistent structural barriers.

Methodology

This study employed a **qualitative and comparative methodology** anchored by a robust conceptual framework to analyze the role and evolution of student involvement in QA within Azerbaijan's HEIs. The primary objective was to contribute to a broader shift toward inclusive governance across the sector in Azerbaijan. The research was grounded in a conceptual framework tracing the progression of student involvement through three stages described in theoretical part of this article: from Consultative to Collaborative and finally to Full Partnership/Co-Governors. This framework provided the essential analytical lens for assessing the current status and identifying the developmental trajectory of student engagement within Azerbaijan’s HEIs. The investigation of the national context involved a detailed analysis of the impact of the Bologna Process (since Azerbaijan's accession in 2005) and the subsequent implementation of the ESG.

The study examined the systemic challenges to meaningful student participation, including the legacy of centralized Soviet governance, which often reinforces hierarchical decision-making, and the varying implementation of internal QA systems across universities. To systematically assess the national status, the study incorporated evidence and data from previous research, notably a comparative survey conducted across six Azerbaijan’s HEIs, which included 2,400 students and interviews with administrators. This evidence provided empirical data on student participation levels in areas like curriculum design and internal evaluation processes. Throughout this analysis, the status of student involvement was systematically assessed across four key dimensions: representation and participation, feedback and evaluation, capacity building, and culture of partnership.

The core of the methodology lies in the comparative analysis of case studies. Three distinct institutions – ADA University (Azerbaijan), the University of Tartu (Estonia), and Lund University (Sweden) – were selected to represent a continuum of student engagement models: a structured national model, a successful post-Soviet transition toward co-governance, and an advanced European model of full partnership, respectively. By examining the institutionalized practices within these cases – specifically focusing on how they implement the four dimensions of involvement – the study sought to identify concrete, transferable best practices. This comparative approach allowed for the extraction of phased, strategic lessons to move HEIs in Azerbaijan from procedural formality toward substantive partnership, thereby informing broader systemic reform.

Findings and Discussion

Empirical studies examining student involvement in QA across Azerbaijani higher education institutions (HEIs) reveal a pattern of limited yet gradually evolving engagement. The comparative research of Mammadova and Valiyev (Mammadova, L., & Valiyev, A.,2020) provides a comparative snapshot of student involvement across six Azerbaijan’s HEIs: ADA University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU), Azerbaijan University of Languages (AUL), Azerbaijan Technical University (ATU), Baku State University (BSU), and Azerbaijan University of Economics (UNEC). Their survey of 2,400 students and interviews with administrators reveal persistent gaps in awareness, participation, and support services. Here are the results of this study:

Table 1. Students’ Participation in Curriculum Design and Knowledge about ECTS

% of Student s’ Participation in Curriculum Design					% of Students who are informed about credit hours		
Participated	Partially Participated	Did not Participate	No idea	TOTAL	Students who know	Students who don’t know	TOTAL
3%	12%	57%	28%	100%	55%	45%	100%

As it is seen from this Table 1, only 3% of students fully participated in curriculum design and 12% partially participated. Nearly half of students were unfamiliar with credit hours and the ECTS system.

As for the involvement in internal evaluation process, students were most active in evaluating instructors (40%) and institutional performance (42%), moderately active in program assessments (38%), and least active in course-level evaluations (18%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Involvement in Internal Evaluation Process

Evaluation of	% of students participated	% of students partially participated	% of students did not participate	TOTAL %
University	42%	30%	28%	100%
Instructor	40%	33%	27%	100%
Course	18%	31%	51%	100%
Program	38%	30%	32%	100%

To the questions of whether the student support services exist in these universities, overall answers were “no” (Table 3). Across the six universities, the presence of career guidance, psychological counseling, foreign language courses, and study abroad information varied considerably. ADA University offered the most comprehensive set of services, with roughly 26% of students reporting access to career guidance, 23% to foreign language courses, and 23% to study abroad information. Other universities showed more specialized strengths: ASPU had relatively better psychological support coverage (around 4.5%), surpassing most other institutions including ADA. Additionally, ASPU and AUL are following ADA’s leadership in foreign language courses (8.50% and 7.29%, respectively), and in exposure to study abroad information (9.25% and 8.04%, respectively). These patterns indicate that while ADA leads in overall service provision, other universities have niche strengths in specific support areas.

Table 3. Existence of the Student Support Services in the Sample Universities

University	Career Guidance Service		Psychological Support		Foreign Language Course		Study Abroad Awareness	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
ADA	1.04%	25.83%	23.58%	3.29%	4.04%	22.83%	3.42%	23.46%
Pedagogical University	16.96%	4.13%	16.58%	4/50%	13.79%	7.29%	13.04%	8.04%
University of Languages	14.29%	1.17%	12.50%	2.96%	6.96%	8.50%	6.21%	9.25%
Technical University	4.88%	0.96%	5.71%	0.13%	5.13%	0.71%	4.42%	1.42%
Baku State University	6.17%	0.38%	5.88%	0.67%	5.00%	1.54%	5.54%	1.00%
University of Economics	14.75%	9.46%	20.96%	3.25%	19.67%	4.54%	11.79%	12.42%
Grand Total	58.08%	41.92%	85.21%	14.79%	54.58%	45.42%	44.92%	55.58%

Building on these insights, Mushtagov (Mushtagov, A., 2021), Isayeva & Aslanova (Isayeva, E., & Aslanova, N., 2021), and Mahmudov (Mahmudov, R., 2022) identify systemic and institutional factors affecting engagement. Mushtagov highlights inconsistent QA practices, low stakeholder awareness, and limited transparency. Isayeva & Aslanova note that students often lack clarity about their roles and face one-directional communication from administrations. Mahmudov emphasizes that while ADA University leads in student engagement, feedback mechanisms still struggle to translate student input into concrete actions. Together, these studies show that although students are formally recognized in QA, their engagement is largely procedural, and targeted support services are critical for meaningful participation.

A recent study by Isaeva et al. (Isaeva, R., Ratinen, I., & Uusiautti, S., 2023) provides valuable empirical insight into how student involvement influences quality indicators in Azerbaijani higher education. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the researchers surveyed more than 430 students across eight universities. Their findings revealed that higher levels of student engagement—particularly strong student–faculty interaction and a supportive institutional environment—were positively associated with key quality outcomes such as academic achievement, satisfaction, and perceived learning gains. Students who reported meaningful communication with faculty and adequate institutional support achieved higher GPAs, demonstrated stronger motivation, and developed better academic and practical skills. Although the study did not directly assess formal participation in QA processes, it indicated that the same factors promoting engagement – dialogue, feedback, and institutional responsiveness—are also essential for effective QA. Strengthening student participation in QA, therefore, has the potential to enhance engagement and improve overall educational quality in Azerbaijani universities.

These findings align with Lizzio’s Five Senses of Student Success model (Lizzio, A., 2006), which highlights the importance of supportive environments, meaningful relationships, and belonging for student satisfaction and achievement. Both studies illustrate that students succeed when they feel connected, capable, and empowered to contribute to decision-making.

Taken together, these studies indicate that while students are formally involved in QA, their engagement is largely procedural. Roles in curriculum design, program assessment, and governance remain marginal, and support services and capacity-building opportunities are insufficient to empower meaningful participation. These findings underscore the need for Azerbaijani HEIs to strengthen feedback systems, institutionalize student roles, and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility.

Azerbaijani HEIs need to strengthen feedback systems with transparent follow-up, expand training and mentorship for student representatives, institutionalize student roles in curriculum and policy development, and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility (Mushtagov, A., 2021), (Isayeva, E., & Aslanova, N., 2021), (Mahmudov, R., 2022)). Strategic leadership and targeted reforms at ADA, Khazar, and ASPU illustrate that student involvement can evolve from procedural formality to substantive partnership.

Applying the established indicators for transitioning from a “student-as-client” to a “student-as-participant” model—representation and participation, feedback and evaluation, capacity building, and culture of partnership—provides further clarity regarding institutional positioning.

Most Azerbaijani universities are positioned within **the transition from the Consultative to the early Participatory stage**. Their practices reflect procedural engagement, constrained representation, incomplete feedback loops, and underdeveloped support structures. Against this sector-wide pattern, some universities, like ADA, show the status closer to Participatory stage.

To illustrate the spectrum of student engagement models and identify practical lessons for Azerbaijani universities, it is instructive to examine the experiences of ADA University, Tartu University, and Lund University, which exemplify consultative, participatory, and full partnership approaches, respectively.

ADA University illustrates the “students as participants” stage, where engagement is formalized but still developing toward partnership. Students serve on committees and program boards, providing input within defined procedures, though decision-making authority remains limited. Transparent feedback mechanisms like “You said – We did” reports strengthen trust, and basic training introduces students to QA processes. The culture is gradually shifting toward collaboration, showing that Azerbaijani universities can institutionalize student roles and build credible feedback systems.

The University of Tartu illustrates a post-Soviet institution advancing toward co-governance, where student representatives hold voting rights on academic councils and faculty boards. A robust digital feedback system ensures transparent evaluation, and handbooks, training, and mentorship programs build students’ capacity to participate effectively. Partnership spans curriculum co-design, strategic planning, and policy development. Supported by national regulations and proactive leadership, Tartu shows how voting rights, systematic training, and digital tools enable genuine co-governance.

Lund University represents a fully developed model of student partnership, supported by Swedish legislation that guarantees formal student influence. Students hold voting rights at all levels, shape strategic and academic decisions, and manage key feedback processes. Strong, professionalized student unions provide extensive training and support. Co-creation is routine, illustrating how legal frameworks and long-term institutional commitment sustain meaningful student partnerships.

Together, these three universities’ experiences illustrate a continuum of practices from consultative to participatory to partnership models and therefore define **a roadmap for Azerbaijani universities** to progressively advance toward achieving full partnership in student involvement in QA.

Step 1 – Establish Minimum National Standards (ADA model):

- Define the mandatory roles of students in QA committees and review panels.
- Introduce common evaluation frameworks across universities.

Step 2 – Build Institutional Capacity (Tartu model):

- Create student QA units or coordinators within universities.
- Provide annual training programmes for student representatives.
- Develop digital platforms for course feedback and monitoring.

Step 3 – Consolidate a Partnership Culture (Lund model):

- Integrate students as equal contributors in governance and accreditation processes.
- Introduce joint staff-student working groups on teaching quality, curriculum renewal, and policy development.
- Ensure secure budgeting for continuous, professional participation.

This phased approach supports progression from minimal involvement to fully shared responsibility in decision-making.

Effective student participation in quality assurance requires both **a clear legal framework and sufficient institutional resources**. In Azerbaijan, the Education Law and TKTA standards acknowledge the role of students in internal QA, and some universities like ADA, have already integrated these principles into local policies. However, the national system still lacks unified procedures that guarantee continuous representation and regular feedback, leaving progress largely dependent on institutional initiative.

Experiences from countries like Sweden and Estonia show how legal clarity transforms participation from a voluntary practice into a formal responsibility, ensuring structured representation, access to information, and a stable role in governance. These systems also emphasize the importance of resources: effective participation depends on funding for training, communication, and digital tools. By contrast, many Azerbaijani HEIs still rely on voluntary student activity and limited budgets, which restricts continuity and impact.

To develop a sustainable model, Azerbaijani HEIs need stronger legal alignment and predictable financial support. Clear regulations, targeted resources, and coordinated institutional practices would create a lasting framework in which students contribute consistently and meaningfully to quality assurance.

Recommendations for Azerbaijani universities:

- Strengthen national regulations - Establish formal requirements for student representation in QA committees, programme reviews, and governance bodies.
- Ensure stable funding - Allocate dedicated budgets for student training, QA workshops, communication platforms, and coordination units.
- Standardize university-level mechanisms - Introduce system-wide templates for course evaluations, student representation rules, and follow-up procedures.
- Professionalize student participation - Provide structured training, handover systems, and mentoring to ensure continuity and competence among student representatives.
- Enhance Transparency and Feedback Loops - Require universities to publish action plans and report on how student input informs improvements.

Conclusions. Azerbaijan has already taken important steps toward student participation in quality assurance, yet the system remains uneven and heavily dependent on institutional commitment. International experience shows that sustainable engagement emerges when legal clarity, financial stability, and structured practices reinforce one another. By adopting a coordinated roadmap, strengthening national standards, and investing in professional participation, Azerbaijani universities can move toward a mature model of partnership in which students contribute meaningfully and consistently to improving educational quality.

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