

**Seventh Quality in Higher Education International Seminar, Transforming Quality,
Melbourne, Australia 30th-31st October, 2002.**

Improving the quality and direction of universities through student involvement

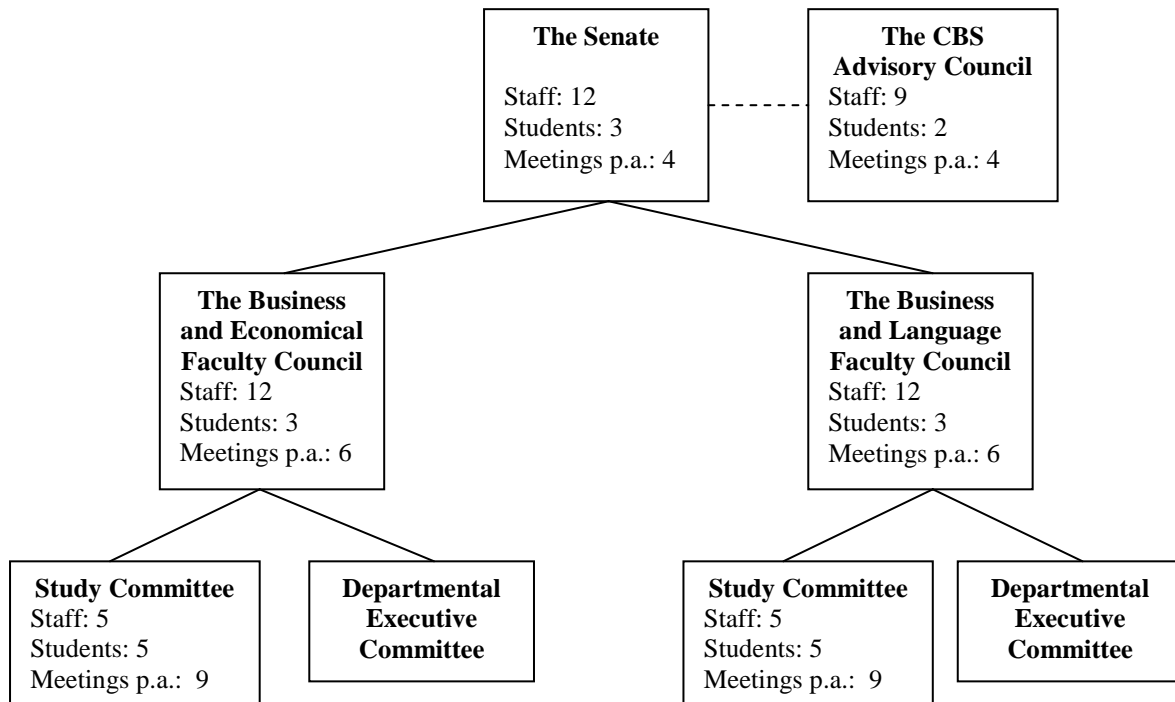
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Outline

This paper shows how students at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) have helped develop their university in the direction that suits the modern demands of today's students and administration. The paper is written by two students from CBS, who both finished their Bachelor in Economics and Business Administration in June 2002, and who both had the privilege of personally influencing the decision making at different levels of administration at CBS. This paper has been built on their experiences and perspectives on how students can help improve the quality of the university at all levels, with special focus on quality at the programme level.

We will begin this paper by illustrating the present organisational structure and different levels of decision making at CBS. The purpose of this is to show for each level of decision making what kind of decisions are made, how many staff and students are involved in the process, and how often they meet to discuss subjects concerning their level of administration.

CBS is organised as the following diagram shows:



This diagram shows us that students are involved at every level of decision making. The *Institute Committee* supplies and sells education and teachers to the Study Committees.

The *Study Committee* develops and maintains the courses offered at CBS. With a student representation of 50% of the members on the board, they have a remarkable impact on discussion topics such as:

- which subjects, teaching and examination forms are best suited for the course;
- whether the curriculum and subject descriptions are up to date;
- does the evaluation results give reason for change;
- handling dispensations and grading matters (merit);
- adjusting the annual entry requirements for attending the course.

The students in the Study Committee are deeply involved in shaping and renewing the programme to suit the demands of the students. They contribute with their knowledge about matters that the academic staff has difficulties gathering with other methods. Students from different years of the programme take up half the seats on board, and they have the most recent experience with teaching

methods, materials, lectures and examinations. CBS uses this tacit knowledge to heighten the quality of the course. The students are taught to conceive the world with constructive criticism in relation to case analysis, but naturally this ability is also used in general in a job or university environment.

It is very important to emphasize that the students do not have the experience nor the knowledge to manage the administration of a programme or a university. But they do have the power to change and renew elements that they consider obsolete and unfit for use in the programme. The students do not formulate the agenda but they have equal rights compared to the staff when discussing the items in the agenda. There is often a general agreement on the outcome of a discussion, and the students as well as the staff present their point of view, with the intention of reaching the best solution for both parties. But sometimes the discussion turns more intense and in rare cases the final solution is to vote. We really see this as a last resort.

We would like to include some of the items that have presently been discussed at our HA Study Committee meetings (HA = Bachelor of Economics and Business Administration), and show what conclusions were drawn. This is to show the seriousness of the decisions that the students are involved in.

In the spring of 2002 the HA Study Committee changed the electives that were offered to the students in the business programme. In the old reform many of the electives were of too low quality and some of them even covered areas similar to the compulsory courses. The result was that many of the elective courses were cut from the programme and new and more relevant progressive courses were offered instead. Furthermore, the students felt a need for developing their English skills, and as a result the students doing the HA-course now need to take one of their electives in English. The elective courses offered now are more up to date with the students' requirements and more compatible with the compulsory curriculum.

Another major function of the HA Study Committee is the ongoing evaluation of courses, curriculum, teachers and examinations. After every course the students get the opportunity to evaluate the sequence. Today the students use the internet and their CBS log-on name to gain access to the pre-developed questionnaires. In the HA Study Committee we deal with the results of these

evaluations, and discuss whether changes are required. If for example a teacher in the evaluation receives less than 2,5 points (scale being from 1-5, and 5 is the highest), the teacher is required to take extra pedagogical courses. If the teacher, after these courses and dialogues with the Study Committee and the Course co-ordinator, has still not improved his or her skills as a teacher after three attempts, occupation as a teacher at CBS is terminated. If the course is generally evaluated less than 2,5, the Course coordinator will be asked to review and explain the situation. Often the students have supplementary comments to their evaluation, which the coordinator will be confronted with to help improve the course for next year.

These are just some of the examples that show what kind of decisions the students are involved in. Student involvement is only possible because CBS has acknowledged that the students, on grounds of their knowledge, can help heighten the quality of the programmes. The evaluation results are not only discussed by the principal of the university, but the student's representatives also gain access to the result by attending the meetings. Everything is evaluated to keep improving and dynamically develop the university. Nothing is censured, but some evaluations are confidential and for the Study Committees members' eyes only. CBS is presently working on a project, where the students can visit a website to find the aggregated results of their evaluation of a course. A way of closing the loop and letting the students know that their evaluations are very much part of the agenda at the Study Committee meetings.

There is some criticism about this evaluation system and the way the university uncovers its strength as well as its weaknesses. The students are not made superior to the teachers but the acknowledgement of the need for the students experience and opinions have given them a professional role in the development of the courses and programmes, and in ensuring the future quality of the university. The development has been protracted, and the present evaluation situation is far from complete. However, the first steps are made towards a joint relationship between the student and the teacher. The power distance between the teachers and the students has been minimized and replaced with mutual trust and understanding.