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Working together to take quality forward

Paper proposal form

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Proposal

Title: The Power of International Networks. How International Cooperation Enabled the Austrian Students' Union (ÖH) to Establish a QA Students Experts' Pool

Abstract (150 words max): In 2011 a new era of external quality assurance in Austria began. The process of further development of the QA system showed the necessity of a deeper debate within the Austrian Students' Union (ÖH) too. In a short period of time,



ÖH gained knowledge on QA, created a QA policy and established a students experts' pool.

This paper gives an overview of the developments to enhance students' involvement especially in external quality assurance by ÖH since 2011. The major focus will be set on the obstacles ÖH was faced with and the process of overcoming them. It will be shown that this was only possible because of strong international cooperations and networks which provided their knowledge. A special emphasis will be set on the issues especially student organizations are confronted with when it comes to knowledge acquisition and the implementation of new structures of knowledge transfer.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

2 Austrias QA policy: a challenge for students experts

Austria has a diverse HE system and within a diverse QA system compared to other European countries. As Bernhard (2012) points out, Austria started late to discuss the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms (in the 1990s). Private HEIs as well as universities of applied sciences had to be accredited, both on institutional and program level, while public universities and university colleges for teacher training just had to implement internal quality management systems. At university colleges for teacher training, there were no external procedures at all, while the Universities Act 2002 (UG) contemplates audits of the public universities' quality assurance management systems. The realization of these audits have to be timed in the performance agreement between the university and the ministry, which first happened definitely in the agreement period 2013 to 2015¹. Consequently external QA was not compulsory which „runs the risk of external quality assurance being largely avoided“ (Hanft/Kohler 2008 p.53 in Bernhard 2012 p.87-94).

For each of the three sectors - public and private universities, universities of applied sciences - existed separate institutions for quality assurance. These three institutions were working independently from one another. In 2011 the Austrian parliament passed a new federal law on external quality assurance in higher education (HS-QSG). While the differences concerning the tools used for external quality assurance were more or less maintained, the three institutions for external quality assurance were merged into one new agency, the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ.Austria), which started its work by March 2012.

Another example is the situation of students' democratic rights. Students' power has been reduced in the past. Since 2002 all stakeholders within a HEI lost democratic influence. (HSG 1998, UG, FHStG). QA can't substitute democracy, quite the contrary: to take QA seriously would mean to strengthen the democratic power of students within HEIs.

3 The Austrian Students' Union (ÖH) and quality assurance in HE

ÖH is the - by federal law defined - representation of students of Austrian public universities, universities of applied sciences and university colleges of teacher training on a national level, with about 350.000 members (<http://www.statistik.at> 1.8.2013), with structures on program and institutional level as well. Membership for students at these HEIs is compulsory, as is the payment of a membership fee of currently 17,50 Euros per

¹ Exemplary: University of Vienna's performance agreements 2010-2012 www.univie.ac.at/mtbl02/2009_2010/2009_2010_45.pdf, which includes preparation for a quality audit (p. 5) and 2013-2015 www.univie.ac.at/mtbl02/2012_2013/2012_2013_77.pdf, which includes the actual procedure of an audit (p.7)



Semester. The involvement of ÖH representatives in decision making bodies on most of the levels of higher education is defined by law. ÖH delegates students' representatives to one of the governing bodies of AQ.Austria too. To sum it up: Due to its status as public body, ÖH can be considered one of the strongest student representation organizations in the EHEA, considering percentage of members of the total number of students, financial facilities and involvement in decision making bodies both inside and outside the HEIs².

But in spite of this relative strength compared to other national student organizations, ÖH had a lack of knowledge when it comes to the topic of quality assurance. This can be considered due to the former legal framework of both student representation and quality assurance in Austria. On the one hand side students at Austrian universities of applied sciences only became members of ÖH on a national level in 2007, so until then, there were almost exclusively students at public universities working in ÖH on a national level. As the quality audits destined in the Universities Act 2002 were not part of performance agreements until 2013, there was not much necessity or incentive for student representatives from public universities to deal with the issue of external quality assurance.

The discussion and acquirement of knowledge first began when ÖH started activities on universities of applied sciences in 2008/09. From then on to 2011 only a few people in ÖH dealt with the topic of quality assurance and the knowledge could not be transferred properly to other levels of student representation.

Besides the problem concerning knowledge on quality assurance, ÖH as an organization has to face an issue most student organizations have to deal with: that of short terms of activity of the elected representatives and the voluntary staff. In ÖH on the national level the legislative periods last two years which leads to a change of the majority of the team at least every second year.

4 The power of international networks

After realizing the problem of having a lack of knowledge as student organization, logically ÖH started to work on the issue. The first step was to figure out how other students organizations have dealt with similar situations before.

The thesis was that the situation of quality assurance processes in German-speaking countries is similar. As it was known in ÖH, that there had already been networking between ÖH and other German-speaking students experts' pools, and there was some contact with foreign organizations through the European Students Union (ESU), ÖH contacted the Swiss and the German students experts' pools. The Swiss colleagues invited an ÖH delegation to their pool training and arranged a network meeting of the three German-speaking pools in October 2012.

The outcome of this meeting was trend setting to create an institutional understanding for quality assurance.

1. Quality assurance procedures become more and more important within the EHEA. From the students' perspective this would mean that it is not enough to have a few students experts. It is necessary to create a broader understanding about QA and its effects on students life within the students population.

2. The diversity of quality assurance systems in German-speaking countries reflects in different structures of students experts' pools. The difficulties of having decentralized

² The structure of ÖH is regulated in a federal act, the HochschulöH- und Hochschülerschaftsgesetz 1998 (HSG 1998)



responsibilities or various quality assurance agencies as in Germany (Kehm, 2006) are not comparable with Austria's QA system. At the same time, the QA market is growing and more European countries allow various European agencies to accreditate their HEIs. This will affect the work of students in review panels, as they have to gain knowledge on diverse national higher education systems.

3. There is an ongoing development in quality assurance. International trends as well as national politics are reflected in quality assurance. A students experts' pool has to react on this discussions and ensure that the pool members are well informed and trained on upcoming debates.

5 Developing a students' QA policy

After having a broader understanding of the challenges a QA students experts' pool would have to deal with, ÖH started to develop a QA policy. The ongoing QUEST project by the European Students Union (ESU) as well as international and national conferences on quality assurance encouraged ÖH to develop a policy that is critical and practical at the same time.

ÖH already had a detailed policy on the quality of teaching and an ongoing debate on commodification of Higher Education. As there was continuity of the groups represented in the executive committee of ÖH from 2009 to today, it was not so difficult to pursue a general position on quality assurance in higher education. Yet this position had to be found. Following networking with other German-speaking student organizations it was especially previous policy work³ done by the National Union of Students of Switzerland (VSS-UNES-USU) that helped to find ÖH's position. The main challenge in policy was to find a balance between the "danger of being part of a system of public accountability connected to the undemocratic new public management approach" (Schneijderberg/Risse Kuhn 2009 p.63) and the willingness to enhance students' involvement by training students and supporting them as external reviewers in quality assurance processes.

Quality assurance has to be critically reflected. If quality assurance means to measure several quantitative indicators such as publication indexes or drop-out quotas, it will not allow discussing the quality and content of lectures or curricula. QA often means a shift of priorities in education (Osterloh 2012 p.212). Business economic vocabulary as „increase in efficiency“ and „growth in output“ become regular terms in higher education debates. That leads to a situation, where education becomes a market and competition the most important. Even though it is known that rankings cannot reflect on learning processes and learning surroundings, there is a risk that quality is abused to put focus on the efficiency of learning – instead of focusing on learning itself (Bakic 2008).

Therefore we have to concentrate on an idea of quality that integrates the people involved, students, teachers and staff, the content of teaching and research, as well as the surrounding society. Quality assurance needs to be more than a list of business statistics. There have to be joint efforts of higher education, involving relevant stakeholders.

Students as a special interest group are in danger of being downgraded to consumers. At the same time QA is a chance for students. If quality assurance puts focus on

³ e.g.: http://vss-unes.ch/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/2006-05-21-d-Grundlagenpapier_Lissabon.pdf



development and transformation processes, it could help to empower students. Empowerment means to ensure that students get tools to create their learning themselves. Students are not only willing to create their learning process, moreover they take the responsibility for terms and conditions of learning as well as for the standards of knowledge they want to reach. Harvey/Green (2000) describe, that there is a need for an „evaluative power“, so students can take and use this responsibility. That means for example to create evaluation methods or to enable students to choose between teaching methods and teachers.

6 Establishing a students experts' pool

In contrary to other QA experts, students experts have a short “lifetime”. When they have gained enough knowledge to become an expert, they will be on duty for just a few years, before they finish higher education. That means on the one hand, that students experts always have to be well trained and informed to keep up with other experts and to be respected in a peer group. On the other hand it means that students experts' pools always have to deal with questions of knowledge management.

After the General Assembly as highest decision-making body of ÖH passed a declaration of intent to establish a students experts' pool in spring 2011, the team in ÖH changed in summer 2011. The new team was willing to take the chance, the restructuring of the Austrian system of external quality assurance had offered, and to continue and deepen efforts concerning the establishment of a students experts' pool and the development of a policy on the topic itself.

After more than a year of acquiring knowledge and developing a policy, the targets of the pool finally became clear. The pool should, on the one hand side, provide students, mainly student representatives, for a possible activity as members of a review team in external quality assurance processes in Austria.

As there was not only determined a lack of knowledge on external QA measures, but also on the internal quality assurance of HEI amongst the vast majority of students' representatives, members of the pool should also get some insights about quality assurance as such, to create a broader understanding of quality assurance. Additionally they should also find out about how internal quality assurance is often performed through the work of academic self-governing bodies, for instance when it comes to the further development of curricula.

Due to the financial facilities of ÖH, financing trainings and networking meetings for the members of the pool is no difficult task to do. As ÖH has a big culture of knowledge transfer through seminars and congresses, there are many former student representatives available who are now working as professional communication trainers, who can support trainings when it comes to methods and didactics.

As an answer to the short terms of activity in ÖH which are accompanied by the possibility of frequent changes in the policy of ÖH, the new pool also had to be deep-rooted in the structures of ÖH and as clearly structured as possible, to avoid future discussions about the organization of the pool. Apart from that it was clear that for a sustainable pool a broad agreement of delegates in ÖH's decision-making body was needed, which should not only include delegates organized in groups represented in the current executive committee.



In a meeting in January 2013 the guidelines for the ÖH students experts' pool were passed unanimously. This decision was followed by another unanimous decision in the next meeting, which laid down the position of a voluntary worker on quality assurance in ÖH's statute.

The guidelines of the pool define this voluntary worker in ÖH as responsible for the administration and organization of the pool and its activities. They include timeframes for the preparation of trainings and networking meetings (both to be held twice a year), rules for the selection of participants for trainings in order to meet quotas of students from different types of HEI, fields of studies and of different gender, as well as a frame for the structure and content of the trainings. These decisions, which were supported by all the members of ÖH's highest decision-making body, give hope, that the students experts' pool has successfully been integrated in the structures of ÖH.

The first pool training with about 20 participants took place on a weekend in March 2013. It was held by the responsible ÖH voluntary worker and a professional trainer, who had designed the training together in advance, based on the contents of the training the ÖH responsible had experienced in Switzerland in October 2012.

One of the most important parts of the training, besides an introduction in the Austrian system of external quality assurance in higher education, was the presence of representatives of the German and Swiss student pools. They not only held short presentations on the QA systems of their countries and beyond that shared their experiences as student experts in external QA procedures – knowledge, which would simply not have been available to such an extent within the structures of ÖH and therefore was an important contribution to the success of this first training and the ÖH students experts' pool as such.

7 Lessons to be learned from ÖH experience

One of the most crucial things when it comes to capacity building and international cooperation in students' organisations is the question of funding of trainings and peer visits. Only if voluntaries of organisations don't have to cover their travel training and accommodation expenses by themselves, international students' cooperation can be a long-term process and not only some sporadic visits. Apart from that, international cooperation needs a common base to build upon together, in this case this was earlier cooperation in other fields of work, comparable higher education systems and a common native language.

8 Still a way to go

Establishing a students experts' pool and creating a policy on QA were only the first steps to strengthen students participation in Austria's QA system. These steps were only possible within less than two years because of the strong international support by other student unions, students experts' pools and ESU providing their knowledge.

For the Austrian students experts' pool itself it is now crucial to ensure a good handover to the next generation, this was meant to be provided through a "smooth handover" with the former and the new voluntary worker on quality assurance working together for two months, trying to include the handover of as much explicit and implicit knowledge as possible and also providing two half-day workshops for all the other new ÖH voluntaries as well.



It is a task for ÖH to establish further good connections to the AQ.Austria – possibly including an agreement on exclusively appointing members of the students experts' pool in reviews at Austrian HEI – as well as to strengthen the cooperation with other students experts' pools in Europe.

One of the main upcoming issues for Austria's quality assurance system as well as for the students experts' pool will be the opening of Europe's quality assurance market. How can we ensure, that the voice of Austrian students is heard, if there are international students reviewing Austrian HEIs? How can we strengthen the network between international QA students experts' pools, to ensure that international reviewers know about the challenges Austria's students are facing?

Some of the participants of the first pool training already gave feedback on the fact, that they have been able to make use of the knowledge gained in the training in their work within the institution. But the training didn't cover all Austrian HEIs by far, many HEI's student representation bodies still lack a QA expert. So we will have to go on struggling for more knowledge on the basis: still most of the students and teachers are not well informed about the influence of quality assurance or their institutional QA system. Even if quality of teaching became an issue during the last year, other QA related topics haven't even been touched yet: how to create learning environments, how to ensure support mechanisms and how to deal with the social dimension and exclusion of students from higher education.

But not only the basis has to be addressed. Even politics is gambling with quality assurance. For the university colleges for teacher training a completely different QA system has been decided in 2013 (Hochschulgesetz 2005). They will be certificated by a new quality assurance council (Qualitätssicherungsrat) instead of an independent agency. The design of this council ignores the European Standards and Guidelines: There is no student's participation planned, rather there is a risk, that it will be abused to ensure political influence by filling the council with political representatives.

Beside all the obstacles we have to overcome, there is a positive conclusion.

The strong cooperation with quality assurance related organizations and experts in Austria and all over Europe enabled ÖH to get involved with Austria's ongoing quality assurance development. ÖH managed to strengthen the relationship to AQ.Austria and various stakeholders within the QA system as well as to establish a students experts' pool within less than two years. This example shows, what is possible through international cooperation - and why there is a need to strengthen European networks and exchange so much.

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Comment [Beate 1]: Streichen?



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Questions for discussion:

Are there any other examples of international, bilateral cooperation between quality assurance related organizations?

How can HEIs and agencies support national student organizations in enhancing students' participation in external QA processes?

How can students organizations, agencies and HEI transfer knowledge about quality assurance to members of HEIs (students, teachers, staff) in order to establish and support quality culture?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.