12th European Quality Assurance Forum
Responsible QA – committing to impact

Paper proposal form

Deadline 24 July 2017

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Adam Gajek, currently serving as Vice President of the European Students' Union 2017/18, previously a member of the Executive Committee of ESU. His main focus lies in the area of quality of higher education, with an emphasis given to quality assurance, prior learning recognition and meaningful students' participation in HE governance. Member of the Steering Committee of the ESU Quality Assurance Student Experts' Pool and a former QA expert of the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA). He has been engaged in the students' movement for many years, formerly served as an International Officer of the Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland (PSRP) and an elected representative of the Students' Union of the University of Warsaw. He has an academic background in economics and political science.

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Gohar's journey in the student movement started from the first year of her studies at the Student Council of the Armenian State University doing various work on student activity and representing students at the Scientific Council of the university. Since 2015 she served as the International Officer at the Armenian National Students' Association (ANSA) working mainly on international affairs as well as on areas of quality of education. As a student expert of ESU's Quality Assurance pool, she attended several evaluations and events on this topic. She recently graduated the first year of her Master studies on Insurance and Finances. She's passionate about reading, philosophy, music and nature.

Title: ESPAQ Project as a case study of students' empowerment in higher education governance

Abstract (150 words max):

The papers describes a project which was established as an agreement of Armenian HE stakeholders, some European universities and organization supporting students' participation in HE. It focuses on role of students in higher education, and tries to support the Armenian students in empowering their position in the local system. The paper describes the local circumstances of Armenian HE, leads through methodology of the project, which based mostly on tracings of students. Then we wanted to present the impact the project had on students - what did they learn throughout their learning process and how would they apply they newly acquired knowledge in their institutions. The project also aim to its own sustainability which will ensure that the outcomes of the project will endure after ESPAQ is finished. In the conclusion we tried to define practices to be applied in other system to provide a meaningful support to improvement of students participation in HE.

The paper is based on: research / policy / **practice**

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? NO

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

The culture of the quality of education is very often reflected in a way students can participate in the HE governance in their country or institution. Meaningful role of students which is played by their democratically elected representatives is a basis of any HE institution or decision, since any decision in HE concerns students in the end. It is very hard to find any HE institution which is fully democratic, but the more visible and influential the role of students is in any institution, the better that institution knows needs and expectations of the group and the better understanding it has with students. This allows to establish trust and confidence between stakeholders as well as high motivation to study for students and to teach for the academics. These values are in a centre of beliefs of the European Students' Union and are promoted by its policies and members. This is why the project ESPAQ was created, aiming in empowering from students by other students with cooperation with other stakeholders[1]. The model of that cross-border students' peer-learning activity is being implicated in Armenia, a country with active students' movement and developing culture of quality assurance, where students are not yet often perceived as a key partner in HE decision-making.

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[1] ESPAQ PROJECT PARTNERS AS CONSORTIUM MEMBERS: University of Macerata, The National Union of Students in Europe, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, Spiru Haret University, National Union of Students Scotland – NUSS– SPARQS, Armenian State University of Economics, Armenian State Pedagogical University after Khachatur Abovyan, Yerevan State Academy of Fine Arts, State Engineering University of Armenia(Polytechnic), National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, Armenian National Student's Association - ANSA, National Center for Professional Education QA Foundation – ANQA, Ministry of Education and Science (AM) – MoES

Since the project is coming to it's end, we would like to present findings made by students from European Students' Union and Armenian National Students' Association. The project has been constructed from many diverse activities, some of them even not engaging students themselves, but the institutions' staff proving peer-learning workshops for their colleagues from institutions participating in project. Since the project has not finished yet while that paper is being written (but actually most of the students' activities are completed), and its general findings have not been worked out by the partners and utmost we represent students' perspective, we would like to present the students' findings on the project's outcomes in terms of impact on students' participation in the Armenian HE system and to introduce what can be learnt and applied in other HE system on the basis of ESPAQ.

Students' place in the HE system in Armenia
Close cooperation in an atmosphere of trust demonstrated by all higher education stakeholders is one of the success factors for the European Higher Education Area. Yerevan Communique adopted in 2015 underlines that support and protection of students and staff in ensuring their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions is needed.

Joining the Bologna Process in 2005, HE sector of Armenia implemented number of fundamental reforms including the establishment of a quality assurance agency that has recently got a membership to European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and was added to the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in 2017. The standards and procedures for quality assurance were developed and approved according to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. Armenian National Students' Association (ANSA) is a member of the European Students' Union since 2012, what had vast impact on the activities of student movement in the sense of representation in Bologna reforms. Bologna Ministerial Conference was hosted in Armenia in 2015 which had a positive influence on perception of Bologna Process by public in general.

The main governing body of HE at national level is the Ministry of Education and Science. The higher education system in Armenia itself is presented by 26 state and 40 private higher education institutions.

Higher education governance in Armenia is highly centralized and formalised as well as very hierarchic. At national level students formally do not have any representation in the higher education governance, since there are no structures applicable for that. Their governing bodies are councils of the institutions, the academic councils and rectors. The councils of the institutions are collegial bodies of governance with five-year mandate. The councils include faculty academics, students, representatives of institution's founder (government in case of state universities) and a representative of an authorizing body, where each fraction has 25% of the seats. The state has majority of 50% of representation (founder and authorizing body), the remaining 50% is hold by faculty members and students. Though having 25% of the seats in the council, representatives of students are not able to use it meaningfully since they are not trained in a field of relevant competencies needed for effective role in decision-making bodies, neither they have enough support from any kind of state's institutions, which do not empower students to be visible and active members of the decision-making bodies. .

In most cases academic staff also does not regard students as equal members/partners within HE processes. In general academic staff members who are not in management positions, often view the Bologna inspired changes as an additional layer of bureaucracy and technicalities that should not required on top of their everyday teaching tasks.

The imbalanced structure of power and too strong grip of the political influence on the higher education system is very much reflected in governance structures being an obstacle for changes in system. Each state higher education institution has a member of the government (including the president, the head of the presidential administration, the chairman of the national assembly, the prime minister, or the minister of education) as chair of their councils. The legislative framework in effect today provides a separate regulation for nearly each aspect of university operations, from curriculum and academic program regulations to human resources management, and from student recruitment procedures to university budgets and financial management. At the same time, regulatory ambiguity is another factor that allows the state nominal control over the universities.

Student participation is being reflected within the QA processes. Here main ideas can be divided between external and internal QA. While being student-

experts in the external QA processes students mainly are perceived as equal members of the panel. The Armenian National Center For Professional Education and Quality Assurance - ANQA (QA agency) provides trainings to equip students with knowledge about criteria and standards for accreditations and external reviews of HEIs. Since February 15th, 2011 ANQA has oparted "Students' voice" programme which aims at increasing students' awareness on educational reforms and replenishing student-experts database and provide student-experts for accreditation processes through continuous trainings.

Nevertheless, a small number of students have the chance to participate in external QA processes. Hence to achieve massive implication and engagement in QA it is of utmost importance to stress the need of students' participation in internal QA processes. A report conducted by ANSA to provide comprehensive data on students' perception of current reforms shows that only 1/5 of students know about the QA process, and the significant majority of those – 73% could not define what the QA is. At the internal procedures students are mainly regarded as respondents – to fill out surveys at the end of semester, without being aware of how the process of Quality Assurance works and what is the purpose of surveys. This is one of features of the Armenian HE system which indicated its highly formalised character. This shows that the cycle of internal QA doesn't work efficiently which directly affects students' engagement into the process. The lack of understanding of the concept of quality education, together with the perception of merely imposed from the top, results in very limited sense of ownership by students of the QA process in general.

There are no robust discussion platforms to express students' views or raise questions and concerns, both within universities and at a broader national level is.

Despite the fact that tuition fees paid by students make up to 90% of the universities' budgets, they are not aware on how this money is being spent. In general there is a lack of transparency in the sector of HE and accountability of HEIs is not ensured. Even if students complain about very basic problems at the university level, they have no knowledge of, access to or influence on how the university strategy is defined, how money is spent and their complaints or opinions are only rarely addressed by the university management.

Drive for change - learning through experience

The main idea of ESPAQ was to engage students into process of quality assurance by improving their participation in that process and enhancing their learning experience. The uniqueness of the project is its focus on students' experience and its evaluation and improvement. There have been many projects which aimed to improve quality assurance, this is also one of important goals of ministries of higher education and QA agencies, but ESPAQ is aiming at students' participation in QA itself. As organisation gathering students' representatives from whole continent we know very well how it is hard to convince state's institutions to give more rights to students' representatives, to make them equal partners. This is still a huge problem in most of the Bologna countries! According to the Bologna with Students' Eyes 2015 only 13 unions of students (out of 34) considers students being equal (but not full!) partners, for the rest students as partners in decision-making at universities are seen, but not heard. Students in some countries have better and more influential position, are able to change decisions, often also take an initiative and they propose solutions suitable for themselves. ESPAQ proposed a consortium, where students from Armenia had a chance to participate in trainings based in Armenia, as well as even 39 students was able to participate in trainings in one of the seven EU countries.

Trainings were extensive, based on interactive and engaging methods and run both, by consortium trainers as well as by Armenian partners. There were six respective sessions of trainings provided in Armenia, where students had an opportunity to learn more about perspectives on education and role of students. Trainings had different topics and also diverse trainers. For the content of the trainings main responsibility was on behalf of *sparqs* (student partnerships in quality Scotland) and ESU, but the Armenian partners were also responsible for trainings. The trainings led students by respective topics as such: importance of engagement in governance, preparation to QA reviews - including simulations, peer learning within QA and peer learning within students' participation (the last one prepared by a large group of EU student, who later hosted Armenian students in their countries). All trainings, as agreed between ESU and sparqs, as well as by other partners, were based on interactive approach and aimed to engage

students in discussions and critical-thinking. Students changed often, there were students who participated in any activity offered by the project, there were some who participated only once. The level of their motivation was obviously different, but we could have noticed that students who come from students' unions were more motivated than students appointed by universities.

The next activity offered to the Armenian students was participation in site visits / students exchanges in EU countries. The three universities in the consortium - University of Macerata in Italy, Universidad Internacional de La Rioja from Spain, Spiru Haret University in Romania, three ESU's member unions USI Ireland, PSRP Poland and LSS Lithuania as well as sparqs (Scotland) hosted seven groups of students from Armenia. The first three visits (organised by universities) aimed to conduct knowledge on QA reviews, what included simulations of QA reviews (students were prepared beforehand thanks to the trainings on reviews organised by *sparqs*). Students had a chance to experience three different types of institutions, their diverse approach to QA and their students' representatives activity. From all of these institutions students valued most practical exercises based on learning by experience, when they were able to apply the knowledge they acquired through project in the QA reviews or in dissemination of their experience in their universities. Students exchanges were fully run but students' unions (in case of sparqs exchange was also organised by Scottish students). The form of trainings and meetings was based on peer-learning, by presenting best practices in the EU countries, common discussions, meeting with local students and sharing their ideas, Armenian students were able to confront their experience with different approaches, and then discuss them with students home, including other ones, participating in activities in other countries. Also students from EU countries had a chance to learn a lot about Armenians' experiences and share best practices with students from other countries.

The project offers also some other support for students, which is coverage of their participation in QA events or trainings of the Armenian institutions staff working with students. The last activity might be very useful for the process of students' participation support provided by institutions, which

were introduced with diverse ways of support for students involvement in HE governance.

Impact on the students' participation

While asked in the evaluation questionnaire, the Armenian students gave diverse answers regarding their motivation in participation in the project. Their attitude might be considered as motivation to do a change in their educational system or to get a chance for personal development. They regard ESPAQ as an unique chance to learn their rights, responsibilities or a unique source of knowledge about education, also they intended to gain new competencies they would be able to use in their students' activism or in further life . Some of them had never been involved in QA before, and ESPAQ was their first touch with students' participation. Also what led them to ESPAQ was knowlegde of English or a will to improve it.

Students claim that participation in the project helped them to gain new skills and competencies. Within them they emphasize improvement of their English knowledge, describing ESPAQ as a unique chance. What is more they also declare learning transversal skills such as problem-solving or critical thinking as outcomes of interactive exercises (since the principle of student-centred learning was one of the basis of trainings, projects also promotes it in Armenia!). Students also gained an extensive knowledge on QA itself, especially through topics such as advocacy, leadership etc. Some students also say that they learnt much about the Armenian HE system. What is interesting, also cultural competencies are indicated as obtained thanks to ESPAQ including communication skills. All students answered that through participation in the ESPAQ they are better prepared to represent students' voice in Higher Education decision making processes.

Students' solutions for improvement

Students were also asked to assess the HE system in Armenia and to give proposals for improvement. Half of the students claimed that *students are consulted but their opinion is not important for the universities' authorities,* other answers differed. As proposed solutions for improvement at university level they proposed better information provision about students' rights, highly needed improvement of exams systems (transparency, fairness, real assessments of competencies) as well as more transparent students' representation system (clear elections' procedures, contact ofthe

representatives with students etc). Within solutions on the national level they indicated e.g. need of democratisation of the HE system with emphasis given to the students' participation, result oriented approach in QA procedures (regulation done in order to achieve improvement, not such for more of red tape), more activity of students at internal QA processes with their real inclusion in the improvement process, independent students unions (from universities and state) and staff trained to understand students' needs in learning and able to assess their competencies.

Sustainability of the outcomes
The project has its' sustainability plan. As an outcome it establishes a legal framework for cooperation of partners after the project is concluded. It is significant that one of the partners is the Ministry. The agreement of which parties are going to be the Ministry, ANSA (national union of students), ANQA (QA agency) and universities which are partners of the project establishes a quality assurance students' experts pool. The pool will be used for QA reviews conducted in Armenia by the agency. At the moment ANQA's students experts come from Student Voice project participants (students after single trainings on QA).
The newly established pool will give a legal framework for the cooperation of the stakeholders, will ensure constant training process and partial independence of the experts from the Agency in terms of the recruitment and selection of the experts, what should be guaranteed by co-chairing the pool by ANSA, so an independent student-run organization. Also the agreement will be open for other HE stakeholders in Armenia to join. The legal framework for the cooperation is still being developed, but the will of the partners and long-lasting fruitful cooperation within the ESPAQ project as well as understanding of the importance of introducing a responsible and independent students' experts body should finish the project successfully.

Lessons learnt
ESPAQ is a an example for a possible cooperation between institutions, by making them all learners of a relatively new concept. Students' participation in HE governance is an idea, which may not be immediately accepted by all stakeholders, but is a necessary step in development of any HE system in the world. Thanks to ESPAQ the Armenian HE system received a unique chance to learn that concept on the peer-learning concept, with cooperation

of the main local stakeholders and while being facilitated by experienced foreign partners. The projects had a focus on students, a part of academic community usually open for changes and seeking for making their voice more heard by institutions.

The project proved that even in very hierarchical and formal HE systems the cooperation between stakeholders and students is possible. Of course the special circumstances have to be ensured to achieve that.

The whole project was just a learning experience to its' participants. Learning by experience, by experiencing the real students' participations' activities like QA reviews, advocacy or campaigning, are the best way to make students' perspectives learn other approached to do their work. Also the peer learning principle applied in the project (students learn from students, staff learns from staff) allowed participants to understand the problems better by learning from people of same positions as they have.

Finally, the project focused only on students, on their knowledge, support and needs. It also showed a value of students to other stakeholders and made it a much more recognised issue in QA reforms then it was before.

References: not applicable

Discussion questions:

How to overcome obstacles caused by formalized procedures of the QA and make it truly open for students' needs?

What makes students' participation in QA really meaningful?

What competences students should acquire at QA trainings and who should provide them?

Who should be responsible for students' QA experts - students' unions, agencies or both?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.