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Broadening the scope of QA

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Call for contributions: paper submission form
Deadline 24 July 2018

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):

Ignas Gaižiūnas is currently a student of Theoretical Physics and Astrophysics (MSc) at Vilnius University (VU), Lithuania. He also has finished studies of Energy Physics (BSc) and School pedagogy (professional pedagogical studies). He's been involved in student movement for past five years. During this time he was responsible for various activities VU SA from being a first year students' tutor to coordinating activities of more than 300 students' representatives in whole VU and leading Parliament of VU SA in shaping position on most important matters of Lithuanian higher education. Last year he also was a member of ESU student expert quality assurance pool and recently he was selected for another year. He is also a student expert in Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) and has participated in external evaluations for 3 years. Main areas of interest: empowerment of students, quality assurance, evaluation, development of study programmes.

Proposal

Title: Case study of coordinated students' representation in quality assurance at Vilnius University

Abstract (150 words max):

The paper describes and analyses a coordinated approach of students' representation at Study Programme Committees (SPC) of Vilnius University (VU). This approach was developed by Vilnius University Students' Representation (VU SA) with the aim to foster further discussion about empowerment of student representatives. After introducing to specific context of VU, paper focuses on the activities which were developed to perform for all student representatives at SPC. Also, structure of student representatives at SPC coordination is briefly introduced by indicating key actors and their duties. These activities were developed in order to tackle problems related to inactive student representatives performance of their duties. It can also be seen how these activities resulted into the

cycle of representation at VU. Moreover, paper explores challenges which VU SA is now facing in regard to students' representation in order to improve meaningfulness and effectives of student representatives at SPC work.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction:

Internal quality assurance in higher education is one of the main preconditions for relevant study experience and effective learning process. This is also defined in chapter 1.1 of revised version of European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). In this case it is also important to note that in order to have inclusive and meaningful education all stakeholders should be involved in quality assurance and decision making. That concept is supported by ESG as well.

However, higher education institutions usually do encounter with difficulties when it comes to student participation and representation in processes of quality assurance. There are two main problems which could be marked out in regards to student representation in quality assurance. First one is related to lack of active engagement from students when it comes to quality assurance and genuine wish to contribute to the improvement of study programmes. Second problem is related to ineffective work of Study Programme Committees (or equivalent) when the responsible body either do not perform its duties or does not take into account student opinion, raised issues in valuable way or even in any way at all.

In that regard Vilnius University (VU) is no exception. As a result, from year 2015 Vilnius University Students' Representation (VU SA - lith. Vilniaus universiteto Studentų atstovybė) started to take actively coordinated steps to improve both: the operation of Study Program Committees and participation of student representatives in the committees (might be referred only by "student representatives" or "representatives" later in paper). This paper will cover activities performed by VU SA in regards to solve the issues regarding representatives raised above, results of those activities and lessons that were learned.

Context:

In Vilnius University there is a system of bodies responsible for whole study quality. Mainly, internal quality assurance in VU at study programme level is being done by Study Programme Committee (SPC). Every study programme has SPC responsible for the whole programme and its implementation. The aim of SPC is to ensure achievement of intended learning outcomes, their relevance and the competitiveness of study programme by taking into account notion of stakeholders and best practice. Resulting from the aim of the SPC, its main function involves being responsible for structure of study programme and its study subjects. Also SPC is responsible for constant analysis of various data in order to make appropriate measures that are needed in regards to the structure and teaching quality in the study programme. It is worth to mention that in order to ensure at least minimum standard of SPC work, in VU regulation it's laid out that every SPC must have at least one meeting per semester.

Mostly SPC consists of no less than 5 members (usually from 5 to 7) and includes no less than 3 teachers of study programme, at least 1 labour market representative and at least 1 student representative (no less than 2, when SPC is responsible for several study programmes). Though it seems that all stakeholders are involved on equal basis, it is still frequent practice that many decisions are being made "behind closed door" without any student involvement in decision making. However, it happens that sometimes those needed decisions aren't even made at all.

Table 1 illustrates the situation of SPC meetings performed in VU during last few years. It can be noticed that there is an increase of SPC, who had at least one meeting per semester over the time. However, it should also be noted that rapid increase of meetings could be attributed to increased accuracy of surveys VU SA performed. In year 2015-2016 only representatives were asked to give information whether their respective SPC had any meetings during the semester, though on year

2016-2017 not only student representatives, but also chairs of SPCs were asked to provide the same information. Information of chairs improved accuracy of the survey results. However, despite increased number of meetings that were held, author of the paper would still question the quality of those meetings and whether they have resulted in any improvement of study programmes.

Semester	Number of SPC in VU	Number of SPC which had at least one meeting per semester	Percentage of SPC which had at least one meeting per semester (%)
Autumn, year 2015-2016	175	78	44,6
Spring, year 2015-2016	177	66	37,3
Autumn, year 2016-2017	179	140	78,2
Spring, year 2016-2017	177	129	72,9
Autumn, year 2017-2018[1]	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 1. Data of SPC meetings performed in VU during a particular period.

From the data given in Table 1, conclusion could be made, that SPC in VU even formally do not work according to regulations. In this case serious doubts could be made whether quality assurance of study programmes is actually being ensured by this intended body. General opinion of major part of student representatives usually confirms this position. However, their opinion is varying looking from the perspective of different faculties and study programmes. The list of factors responsible for the ineffective work of SPC could be created. However, do to the nature of this paper, those reasons won't be investigated further and in this paper focus will be put only on work of student representatives.

Representatives at every SPC are elected annually by conference of students from the respective faculty where the programme is being implemented. Term of elected representative work is one year. However, it's usual practice that representatives are asked to run for their positions for several years in a row whenever it is possible, so the continuity of students' representation would be ensured.

Though every SPC formally has a student representative, representatives sometimes are not provided with opportunity to perform their duty of student representation in effective manner, while working on SPC. Reasons for unsatisfactory work of student representatives, besides obvious non-involvement of them, are indicated below:

- o Student representatives do not know their duties and their role in quality assurance;
- o Students do not have sufficient competences to perform their duties as student representatives;
- o Students are afraid of negative repercussions after raising their problems, because majority of those problems are linked to certain teachers or administration workers' quality of work.

This paper will continue into providing an analysis, how VU SA dealt or is still dealing with reasons explained above.

Coordinated students' representation:

Until year 2015 students' representation was made solely on the basis of particular student representatives' volition and interest. In other words, representatives made actions to improve respective study programmes only when they wanted to. In order to tackle extensive problem of unproductive student representatives' participation or even non-participation in the activities of SPC,

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[1] Analys for the given period was not done since it was decided to perform analysis only once a year.

VU SA decided to take a coordinated approach to students' representation. That is why some central structure has appeared to coordinate activities of student representatives. This structure is given in Picture 1.

| VU SA Student representatives coordinator | → coordinate → | VU SA of the Faculty Student representatives coordinator | → coordinate → | Student representative at SPC |

Picture 1. Structure of student representatives' coordination at VU SA.

From the picture given above it can be seen that there is a hierarchical coordination system, launched to coordinate activities of representatives with three major roles: VU SA Student representatives coordinator, VU SA of the Faculty Student representatives coordinator (might be referred as Faculty coordinators) and Student representatives at SPC.

It should be noticed that representatives as themselves are coordinated by the VU SA of the respective Faculty Student representatives coordinator. Coordinated approach of student representation takes into account that students from the particular faculties can have a better connection with their student representatives at SPC. As a result, representatives of the faculty are usually coordinated and contacted by the particular VU SA of the Faculty student representatives' coordinator. This coordination also involves providing representatives with information necessary to perform their duties well and receiving reports from representatives on their activities. Also, Faculty coordinators ensure that representatives would perform their defined duties and participate in all designed activities for representation by keeping contact with them constantly and organising meetings periodically.

VU SA Student representatives coordinator in turn is responsible for coordination of activities performed by Faculty coordinators. It includes providing support to carry on duties of Faculty coordinator and ensuring that Faculty coordinator would actually assure work of representatives. VU SA Student representatives coordinator communicates with representatives directly only occasionally (on most important issues) when information has to be delivered in specific ways. However, due to enormous amount of representatives (around 170) this kind of communication is only one-sided and rarely is very effective. Though it is effective when Faculty coordinator does not perform his duties well, then representatives at least receive most important information.

During a three-year process of improvement, VU SA has defined responsibilities and role of representatives at SPC. Though, that understanding of student representatives' role in quality assurance is still changing. Also, descriptor of student representative position was developed to list main responsibilities which representatives have to take. The created descriptor was introduced to representatives and was thoroughly analysed, also the discussion about meaning of particular responsibilities was held too.

The most important activities developed to help representatives improve the output of their work will be presented further. These activities were developed to tackle major problems in students' representation at SPC and provide guidelines for effective representatives' job.

- **Trainings**

  In order to enable meaningful representatives' participation in activities of SPC and high quality representation of students' opinion and interest, representatives need relevant competences. To provide representatives with necessary competences special trainings are held on yearly basis. Those necessary competences were related with having knowledge and skills to perform other planned activities for student representatives. As a result, all the activities in these trainings tend to be oriented to build up practical skills for representation as much as possible.

- **Analysis of students' feedback**

One of the main conditions for representatives to represent student needs effectively is knowledge of student opinion and interests. Information about student needs is always collected by students' feedback surveys results analysis. These surveys are performed in VU after every study semester.

- o **Meetings with students**

In parallel to analysing students' feedback in surveys, representatives are also required to perform live meetings with at least several students from each study year of the programme. This activity was launched in order to gather additional information about the problems which students are facing every year of study. It allows to build closer connection between student representatives and students themselves, also to foster trust in students' representation, which is being done at SPC. So the burden of organizing these meetings would be lightened for representatives, practical tips and tricks were prepared. Also, a list of recommended questions to ask was developed, based on the most common issues in study programmes. However, representatives are usually lacking skills to gather students for discussions, thus Faculty coordinators sometimes are providing some organizational help.

- o **Preparation of "Problem Description"**

Based on collected student opinion and arising problems representatives are asked to prepare a document called "Problem Description". In this document representatives have to analyse the problem by describing it. They have to analyse the problem and, whenever it is possible, present possible solutions to solve that particular problem. It is welcomed when representatives are working on several problems of the programme at once, while they're preparing mentioned document. However, it has to be mentioned that "Problem Description" is not mandatory. It was developed to help representatives in their preparation for presentation of problems at SPC. This document also pushes representatives to think through the issue, which has to be stated at SPC, from different perspectives. So, if the representative finds equivalent way to reach mentioned goals it is very welcome. Also, this document can serve as "memory" for future generations of representatives to learn about issues raised previously.

- o **Presentation of problems to SPC**

Presentation of problems to SPC is the most difficult action, which has to be performed by student representatives, because usually students have to overcome fear and discomfort. At this stage, representatives have to convince SPC with the importance of the problem and the need of solution. Moreover, it is a stage of representatives' work, where VU SA can't offer many concrete steps to take. At this point, one of the suggestions for representatives is to send their prepared "Problem Description" directly to the SPC or to talk over the problems with the chair/other members of SPC and ask them to raise those problems during the meeting. After this, representative has to develop his own way to deal with SPC. On a side note, it was noticed that reasoned problems and proposals for solutions are better received and more accepted in social and humanitarian sciences than in physical and life sciences.
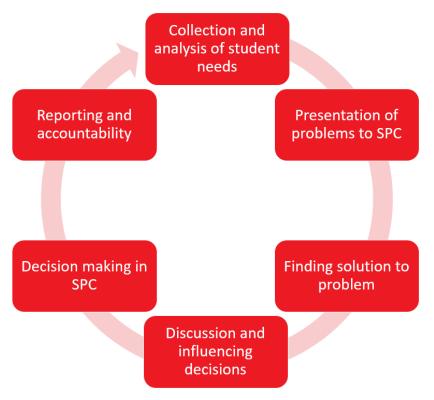
- o **Reporting**

In order to foster sharing of the experiences and ensure "memory" of the representatives, they are asked to report about their activities to Faculty coordinator. This reporting usually remains at non-formal level by writing an e-mail or texting a message with relevant information. However, student representatives have mandatory duty to provide a written report to coordinator after every official meeting of SPC. This is important, so that other generations of representatives could get the best possible knowledge of previous decisions. Furthermore, positions expressed by the representatives at SPC could be supported by other student representatives, when the final decision comes to higher bodies. Finally, information provided by representatives is used to account for student community for the work of all representatives. However, despite that, representatives are always encouraged to report back to student community of particular programmes too, this is asked to do through non-formal ways such as groups in social networks or e-mails.

It's worth to mention that majority of the activities described above are not mandatory to perform in one specific manner (expect for trainings and reporting).

After practice of making these and similar activities with student representatives for several years, the cycle of representation was developed. This cycle is a theoretical concept of how representation should be done. Currently cycle is used to describe representation of student needs and the processes of representation itself. This cycle is presented in Picture 2.

Picture 2. Students' representation in SPC processes, developed by VU SA.

Also, it is worth to mention that after analysis of the issues, raised by student representatives in "Problem Descriptions" and directly at SPC, it can be seen that there are several problems, which are concerning students the most. Considering these problems, in future VU SA should think through provision of some methodological help and support for representatives to solve these particular problems.

These problems are related to:

1. Placing of study subjects in programme plan. Usually students are concerned, in which semester particular subject should be taught. It is a quite common case that some subjects are taught too early without accomplishing prerequisites. Other common practice is that content and competences of several subjects are duplicating each other;

2. Suitability of evaluation methods. It's a usual problem that evaluation methods are used not aligned with learning outcomes and do not evaluate them properly;

3. Quality of teaching. Another common issue is related with teaching. Sometimes students aren't satisfied with lecturers teaching, because they are lacking of pedagogical competences.

Challenges for the future:

Despite current work and all the achievements that were already made, student representation at SPC still faces many challenges. It is still being felt that there is **lack of competent support for student representatives**. Student representatives usually are lacking practical knowledge and determination to perform their duties well, though, now they at least have sufficient theoretical knowledge.

Challenge arising from the need of support for representatives is **an opportunity for close cooperation between student representatives and peer support**. Some kind of peer support system would enable representatives to share experiences between each other. Also, this could enable representatives to know better actual good practice and success or failure stories of other representatives. This would provide additional motivation and material to think through their activities.

In order to ensure better student representation, **successful transfer of relevant information from one generation of student representatives to another one** should be ensured. Currently a large gap between two generations of representatives is being felt. This gap includes knowledge of what has been done, what promises were made by SPC or administration, what kind of arguments were used to solve the particular problems and what the solutions of those problems were, etc.

Though, VU SA had a good start by creating methodological way for student representatives to work, there is **a need of wider variety of methods to perform representatives' duties**. Current methods of representation are acting well, however, it should be taken into account, that there are different people working in different faculties and/or study programmes with different ways of performing duties of the SPC. As a result, representatives also have to choose different methods to tackle problems which arise to students. This could be solved by collection and analysis of existing ways of student representation at SPC.

Conclusions:

After three years of work, a clear increase of SPC meetings quantity and quality could be seen. This has also happened due to other activities that were held to push SPC to work, not only due to activities of student representatives at SPC.

By doing coordinated representation and activities described in this paper, a theoretical cycle of representation was developed in VU SA. It brings a lot of clarity for student representatives on their duties and activities. The scheme of representation could also be applied to other bodies where student representation is implemented.

Though, activities performed by student representatives are clear and rather easy to accomplish, representatives still require a lot of organisational help to do their job, either from Students' Union/Council/Representation or administration of higher education institution. Also, peer support system should be released as well as other measures to empower representatives by providing them with motivation, good examples and more varying methods to consult about performance of their duties.

References:

- European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015.

Discussion questions:

1. How to provide representatives with necessary support to have a meaningful input in quality of higher education?
2. To what extent activities of student representatives should be centrally coordinated?
3. How to encourage students to raise problems and speak about other critical moments in small academic communities?
4. What steps student representatives should take to make relevant impact at SPC?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do <u>not</u> send a hard copy or a PDF file.