2019 European Quality Assurance Forum

Supporting societal engagement of higher education

Hosted by TU Berlin
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Call for contributions: Paper submission form
Deadline 22 July 2019

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.

Author(s)

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Short bio (150 words max): Pegi is a Croatian Students` Council Incumbent President and a President of the Students` Council at the University of Rijeka. She is a member of the European Students` Union Quality Assurance Pool of experts and she has more than 3 years of experience in being a students` representative, with 5 years of experience in being a member of the QA committees at her faculty and at the University. She participated in the committees for the recognition of infomal and non-formal competences of students, leading to participation in policy-making on this topic at the University level. Her recent focus in on recognition procedures of external competences in the committee formed at the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia, and she had presented the students` perspective on this topic during the 20th Bologna Anniversary as a part of the "Seminar on substantial difference", addressing Lisbon convention and its implementation in Europe.

If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who is the corresponding author and who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

IMPORTANT: If you are submitting a proposal, please do not register for the event online until the results of the selection process have been announced. Papers selected for EQAF 2019 will benefit from one reduced fee per contribution, which will be applied through a special registration process.

During the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum as well as the associated Powerpoint presentations will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers. Please however note that all Powerpoint presentations will be published, regardless of whether the full paper is published.

Proposal

Title: Quality assurance within student representation in Croatia: breaking the barriers between academia and community

Abstract (150 words max):

In an everchanging world of student representation, Croatian students have noticed a need for change in the development, organisation and evaluation of the quality of their students` representatives and their work to assure its sustainability. Students are aware of the Universities` growth and there is an intrinsic motion to follow. It is evident that Academia and society act exclusively sometimes, whereas barriers and resistance from the society to the scientific community may follow as a lack of understanding complicated topics. Students in Croatia feel that they have the role of mediating knowledge from academia to the community, thus helping the society to grow peripherally towards the centre of the scientific community and advancement. Quality assurance within student representation can contribute greatly in creating community-oriented programs to benefit both universities and local communities, by supporting students` projects within the focus area, recognition of their obtained competences and changes within the curricula.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

It has not been published anywhere previously.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

The idea of introducing quality assurance (QA) within student representation is being currently discussed and developed on the national level in Croatia. The topic covers the proposed model of students` QA (SQA) which should be launched within 2020.

Introduction

Within the scope of the Croatian QA, a lot of effort was put into internationalization and recognition of qualifications in 2019., building atop Croatian universities` strategies, in which most have taken up the goals of increasing internationalisation[1,2,3,4]. With the focus on internationalization, it is evident that the increase in the number of foreign students will appear, and student unions cannot help but wonder are we ready for such diversity and can we fulfill the needs of foreign students in terms of their specificities and standards. Looking beyond the diversity of students, we can see that the same diversification trends follow in community, not only in internationalization but in the state of mind and decision-making. As democracy is more evident than ever before, we can attest community members rejecting scientific facts, right to own opinions labeled as the dominant truth of oneself, therefore not considering the benefit of the community above the benefit of oneself. These were two strong motivators for the students in Croatia to try and develop a system, which could serve as a connection between academia and community and assure that student representation is shifted from the present models of individual local autonomy to the integrated national system within the SQA frame. This system would also carry the potential to overcome the barriers within scientific proofs and publicly formed opinions, as one of the strategic SQA goals, by integrating students practically within communities as a part of their curriculum, having the "popularisation of knowledge" impact on the community.

Although the SQA is a recent idea, and it is still being developed, we consider this model important to be introduced at the European level, to show that students united can create a sustainable system for development of higher education from students` representatives' standpoint. This system can strategically support the strategies of the universities, following curricula and providing an added value to it.

Student representation system in Croatia

The Law on Student Councils and Other Student Organisations[5] in Croatia regulates how student councils are constituted, funded and what are the obligations of these organizations. Croatian Student Council (CSC) is a structure that coordinates the work of HEI student councils in the Republic of Croatia,

mainly discussing and advocating for student interests and carrying out international activities. It involves tracking of student regulations implementation, cooperation with the Ministry of Science and Education in the preparation of student policy, assuring conditions for the proper functioning of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) students` councils, nominates student representatives for international organizations… CSC is constituted of 8 representatives with voting rights, from HEI on the territory of Croatia, and 1 representative from the University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

CSC has the right to represent Croatian students on an international level, and it is an active member of the European Students` Union (ESU). As a part of ESU, student representatives are exposed to the current trends and knowledge in the field of QA in higher education, and the idea of securing a future of development of student representation has started to grow, with the increase in interest for international cooperation with other student unions, but also with the development of HEIs` strategies, overpowering the possibilities for student engagement in some cases.

The idea of SQA

Having witnessed some of the Croatian Universities becoming more and more engaged in the development of higher education on both national and international level, and with the increase in interest in European trends in education, students have felt the need to upregulate their work to develop long-term strategies for students` representatives.

As students change every few years in representation, both in local unions, and in national, we see that the continuation of previous representatives` goals often gets set aside by the new students in waiting for a better time of implementation, whilst they develop new goals. Alongside this, students` representatives on a national level have a hard time tracking their work, which often results in CSC discussing matters of immediate concern for Croatian students, having very little space to dedicate towards building future goals. We feel the need to change this and we want to create a framework to assure the constant development of student representation, which will not only help in resolving current matters of importance to students, but will assure the quality within the students` representation system and its progress. We want students to not only be involved in the process of tracking the progress of the Universities` development, but to be the drivers of change as well as proactive participants.

Why is SQA necessary?

CSC is not granted funds for its work, students` representation in Croatia is not paid and student representatives do not have the right to take leave while serving their mandates. This adds transparency to the work of students` representatives but results in lower activity of the students` representatives on a national level. This creates difficulties in regard to tracking the progress of representatives` work, due to lack of data from previous presidency, serving periodically for 1 to 2 years as regulated by the Law on Student Council and Other Students` Organisations.[6] As there is no data to follow up on, the system of student engagement in representation depends solely on the time and effort of the presidency to bring change or develop new ideas.

Consequences of lack in the organization of the representation system are long and inefficient procedures for adopting changes in laws of importance to students, but also having a non- united opinion of students as the years pass in the process of law- changing. Students do not have the opportunity to learn from their predecessors and create a unique vision on the higher education system, which results in unclear goals of the students and therefore, inefficient representation and non- satisfactory results. The other problem that emerges is a clear division between HEI, community and student representatives, which are perceived as opposite sides, even when working on common goals. There is a great need to change this, and students want to be perceived, not only as observers and correction factor in the HEI committees but as equal contributory partakers in the process. Students can and need to be the link between the community and higher education system, being the ones who listen to the needs of the employers and the working sector, and choose their careers accordingly.

Even though the universities are choosing ranking systems to attract students and are motivated to change to gain a better position on a list, this process is entirely operated by the HEI, with students having little impact on it. As the students enroll in a university there must not be a difference in student

representation support that they are receiving, and the goal of the SQA is to standardize the quality of representation for every students` organization run by the students and for the students. SQA would change based on the observations from the community and HEI, to assure that HE system is well suited for the current and future needs of the industry and economy.

SQA structure

SQA structure is composed at the national level, serving as guidelines for the work of local students` unions, and as a procedure for their annual assessment and reassessment. SQA changes periodically, every 5 years, to assure improvements.

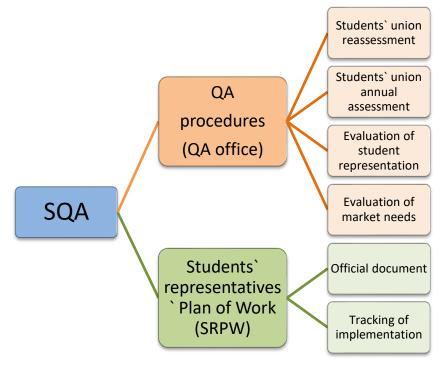The *Figure 1.* below serves as an explanation of the proposed SQA system.

Figure 1: representation of SQA structure

SQA is divided into 2 different parts, each serving a different role:

1. QA procedures are tracking the quality and development of the local student unions in accordance to the national student union`s (CSC) priorities.

2. Students` representatives` Plan of Work (SRPW) which consists of an official document with the 5-year plan of implementation and describes the procedure and guidelines on how to achieve and track the implementation of set goals.

QA procedures

QA procedures are made for the CSC QA office to track the implementation of the Plan of Work and to assess the real needs within each local student union, to implement into the next SRPW. There are two different procedures within the QA office, that one students` union will have to pass each year. Based on the SRPW, local unions will have to be assessed yearly, to be able to develop anew each mandate.

The assessment procedure is imagined as self- evaluation of each union, not only in the set and achieved goals, but also in regards to the quality of the national student representation and the help and

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benefits each union acknowledges coming from CSC to the local unions. CSC has to define core activities and be responsible for helping local unions achieve their goals with their expertise, advocacy and influence in decision making in the national policy-making committees.

Students` unions` reassessments will be done periodically, at the expiration of the previous SRPW. Reassessment is the process that will grant students` unions` CSC certification of the quality of student representation. This certification will provide validity for the Unions` candidates for the national policy-making committees, which CSC elects. Each union that does not pass the reassessment process is not automatically excluded from the CSC, but CSC cannot guarantee for the representatives from these unions. This will also grant to CSC the possibility to track the progress of the stated unions more closely to see why are they underachieving in their development, and how they can be helped.

QA should not be one-sided, and student representatives must act according to the wishes of all their students, not only the representatives. We must also act to improve the competences of our students, to keep them in our labour market, which suffers due to the lack of working force. This is where we get the chance to include community into shaping the students` representations` goals.

Two separate evaluations will be done. First is the evaluation of students` representation that will be national and will involve getting feedback from every student on the matters that they want to change on their HEI and in HE in general. Second evaluation would be sent to the employers at the labour market, separately for each field of studies, to see what are the actual needs of the labour sector and does the HE prepare students suitably. This information is invaluable and will shape and inspire changes that are more concrete and visible to the students than changes in student representation.

SRPW

SQA should track priorities from the EU agenda for higher education, set by the European Commission in 2017[7], for building their first Plan of Work. Those priorities are:

1. Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development;

2. Building inclusive and connected higher education systems;

3. Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation;

4. Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems

For each goal set, there would be provided subgoals and activities each union could implement in order to fulfill the set SRPW goal.

- ***Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development***

According to the data obtained from the labour market evaluation, a clear vision of the needs of the community would be assessed. This would help students` representatives analyze how prepared are the students for the labour market according to the employers. The students` perspective need to be gathered locally in each student union to evaluate how ready do the students feel to engage in the community and the labour market. One of the most important partakers in skills mismatches are the students that have already obtained a degree within the past 5 years and work.

In regards to the future of employment and the jobs of the future, same evaluation needs to be done as the ones described in the previous paragraph, but also the technology needs to be compared between industry and academia, to see if there is a standard between the two, to be able to teach students on the use of this technology for industry purposes. We would also like to see how fast and how efficient the curricula are changing.

Regarding the promotion of excellence in skill development, we want to advocate for better recognition of formal, non-formal and informal competencies obtained by the students whilst enrolled in universities. Also, we want to advocate for the automatic recognition of competencies within the European Union member states for fully accredited programs.

Long term, we want to support and add to the idea of lifelong learning more practical activities which can also be performed by the student experts for the members of the community. This would include student-related topics for which CSC could guarantee.

- ***Building inclusive and connected higher education systems***

As internationalisation is growing in HE, we notice that students are becoming a group more diverse than ever. Student representation has mostly been exclusive for Croatia students, for our documents are all written only in Croatian, making it difficult to understand for foreign students. We would make a step forward becoming more inclusive to all the students, no matter where they come from, by translating all our documents to English, German, Italian and French language.

Lack of support is also a problem for the foreign students within the students` representation. Student unions form offices which are dealing with the topics of interest for students, such as offices for: IT, international cooperation, science, public relations (etc.), however, there are no offices for foreign students. ERASMUS coordinators mostly deal with the requests and needs of those students, and it is important that these activities are passed onto the students` representatives, to assure approachability and fluidity in resolving students` problems as much as possible.

Connecting HE with societal needs in the cities and throughout country can contribute to the development of social, practical and other values of students. We strongly support bringing changes to the curricula, which would assure that the latest knowledge, topics of scientific interest (etc.) are discussed within classrooms in argumentative way, supported by facts, in order to develop students as understanding and curious scientists that do not disregard the facts, and act to the betterment of general public knowledge.
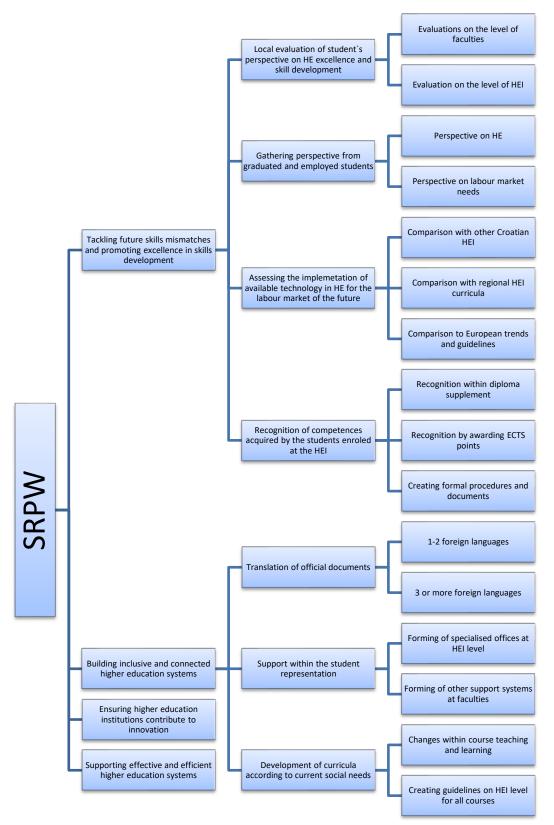
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SRPW
├── Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development
│   ├── Local evaluation of student`s perspective on HE excellence and skill development
│   │   ├── Evaluations on the level of faculties
│   │   └── Evaluation on the level of HEI
│   ├── Gathering perspective from graduated and employed students
│   │   ├── Perspective on HE
│   │   └── Perspective on labour market needs
│   ├── Assessing the implemetation of available technology in HE for the labour market of the future
│   │   ├── Comparison with other Croatian HEI
│   │   ├── Comparison with regional HEI curricula
│   │   └── Comparison to European trends and guidelines
│   └── Recognition of competences acquired by the students enroled at the HEI
│       ├── Recognition within diploma supplement
│       ├── Recognition by awarding ECTS points
│       └── Creating formal procedures and documents
├── Building inclusive and connected higher education systems
│   ├── Translation of official documents
│   │   ├── 1-2 foreign languages
│   │   └── 3 or more foreign languages
│   ├── Support within the student representation
│   │   ├── Forming of specialised offices at HEI level
│   │   └── Forming of other support systems at faculties
│   └── Development of curricula according to current social needs
│       ├── Changes within course teaching and learning
│       └── Creating guidelines on HEI level for all courses
├── Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation
└── Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems
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Figure 2: Students` representatives` Plan of Work goals 1 and 2 with the division to sub goals and activities

- ***Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation***

Although this goal is set for HEI, students want to contribute by supporting and implementing environmental, social, scientific and other solutions made to benefit the society.

It is important to advocate for closer cooperation between HEI and business in the creation of the workspace for the future. Environmental changes we can implement include: use of renewable sources of energy, use of all available sources (water, paper etc.) responsibly, using public transportation, posting to all rooms notice on a responsible use of sources, putting recycling bins in all our offices on a national, local and faculty level.

Support of innovation facilities for students, such as research hubs, organized programs etc., that contribute to the entrepreneurial students` activities. These programs can be supported not only financially, but also by being named as a priority for financing. This is important especially due to lack in entrepreneurship on the level of higher education due to students not being prepared enough to start their businesses, lack support or finances and their efforts are not recognized in HE.

- ***Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems***

By introducing SQA, students` representatives can contribute greatly to the effectiveness and efficiency of HE systems, through the engagement with the society and academia, in a way it has not been done before. Structuring the QA over the years in Croatia within student representation, independently, by the students and for the students, should result in a higher impact of students on the development of HE and students` representatives being perceived as equal to all other members of policy-making committees.

Certification of local student unions would contribute to the equality in goals on a national level, and would create a pool of student experts, which from not only the students can benefit, but the HEI and the Ministry of Science and Education also. Unions should be additionally financially rewarded for their efforts, to support more students` projects than they can afford now.

Excellence should be rewarded and appreciated beyond HEI the students come from, and their competences and qualities should be evaluated and validated properly. This includes students` unions who should show appreciation for their most engaged and active members by developing a rewarding program for their members.

CSC should gather all the knowledge from local students` unions in developing guidelines for the building of the next SRPW.
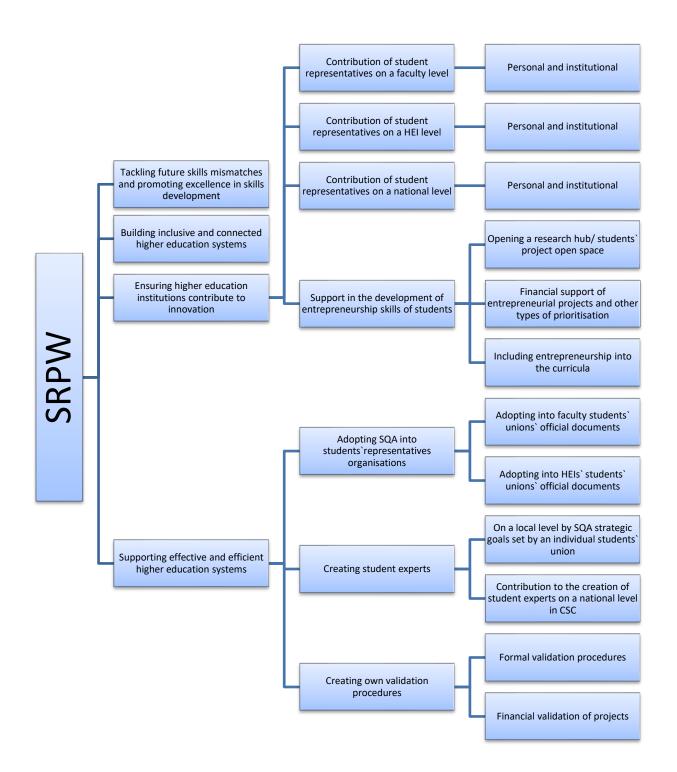
Figure 3: Students` representatives` Plan of Work goals 3 and 4 with the division to sub goals and activities

Conclusion

Croatian students have grown more self- conscious and Europe- oriented in the past years, having the possibility to engage more actively than ever before in the process of building and development of the HE national agenda. We feel that students can contribute to the development of HE by becoming a great supporter of change in the curricula, by collecting and analyzing the current state of HE, teaching and learning, students` representation, use of technology, the needs of the society etc. By establishing a well organized QA system, local unions could get national support that they need, and the gathered knowledge between the unions could be shared to form a unique and organized representation system. Alongside this, SRPW is formed as a list of necessary changes within the HE system, which unions would work on throughout the 5 years, to develop both locally and contribute to the national union. SQA is the system that could be fully functional within a few years, and we feel that this system will result in changes that assure better fluidity in resolving the matters of student interests and the improvement on HE standard for all students.

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Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 22 July 2019 to eqaf@eua.eu.
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.