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Proposal

Title: Thinking out of the box as a precondition for sustainability and innovation development

Abstract (150 words max): Institutional quality initiatives have been the main guidelines in developing internal Quality Assurance (QA) processes at South East European University (SEEU). The University promotes quality in order to meet the needs of its stakeholders and fulfil the societal responsibility of a modern higher education institution. The aim of this paper is to show how successful these processes are and how much they contribute towards creating new values in the society that aspires to reach European standards. Data from different instruments for measuring performance are being analyzed. The findings are expected to be used as evidence for the maturity of the internal QA system which indicates the institutional effectiveness, for guiding the future development of that system, and for proposing an innovative way of performance management that can be followed by other educational institutions.

Key words: quality, performance, development, university, society

The paper has not been published/presented anywhere.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Higher education institutions have put quality assurance (QA) in the centre of their interest in the last few decades in response to the requirements to demonstrate effective performance. Although with a very specific and different scope of activities from the business and industry, they borrowed the quality concept from these sectors and tried to develop measures for organizational effectiveness based on their models. (Ponder, 1999). As pointed out by Lindsay (1999), there have been many challenges in achieving this goal, simply because some impediments arise from "measurement problems with instruments which are not equal to the task of capturing the complex and intangible nature of educational inputs and outputs" (Lindsay, 1999, p. 687). In order to be able to plan and take actions about improving their performance, higher education institutions need information about the effectiveness of the value systems they have introduced and implemented.

This paper analyzes the QA model at the South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia aiming at examining if and how much it contributes towards institutional improvement and how that improvement affects the society. Data gathered from different instruments and the trends they show are being analyzed and correlated. The final goal is to test the maturity of the internal QA system which serves as an indicator of institutional effectiveness, to guide the future development of that system and to present an innovative way of performance management that can be followed by other educational institutions with an ultimate aim: serving the society in its internationalization and integration processes.

Current institutional measurement



SEEU established its institutional QA system based on the originally developed Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) from 2005 (EURASHE, 2015). Founded in 2001, as a private public, non for profit higher education institution with strong international support, SEEU was born close to the time of signing the Bologna Declaration (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2018). Thus, compared to the other universities in the country and the region, it had the advantage to organize its academic offer and student support based on the main commitments resulting from the Bologna process: three year cycle degree structures, recognition of qualifications, quality assurance, learning and teaching, internationalization and employability.

This orientation towards development of an institutional QA system was due to the influence of the international factor, but also to the lack of a real and systematic national approach towards QA in the country. The National Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Macedonia 2005-2015 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2005) identified three key weaknesses: absence of a coherent system of quality control at a central level, absence of an independent body in charge of quality control, and lack of professionals trained in quality assessment and control. The Law on Higher Education from 2008 and its numerous amendments (Zakon za visoko obrazovanje na RM, 2008) regulated QA in article 68 which referred both to the accreditation and evaluation of the higher education institutions. However, this function was done by the National Accreditation Board dealing only with the conditions and documentation for the work of the Universities and not with institutional quality assurance. The new Law on higher education was adopted in 2018 (Zakon za visoko obrazovanje na RM, 2018). Some of the weaknesses with regard to QA have been overcome in this law. For example, there is a provision for establishing an Agency for Quality in higher education, consisting of a Board for Accreditation and Board for Evaluation; each one with specific duties. The later one is supposed to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions. However, one year after the adoption of the Law, the Board for Evaluation has still not been composed and it remains to see how it is going to function.

In the meantime, SEEU is putting a lot of efforts to further strengthen its institutional QA system independently from the national bodies. At times of big demographic changes and significant decrease of student population due to the “broader socio-economic trends of demographic decline, a consequence of low birth rates and high migration flows” (World Bank, 2018 in OECD, 2019, p. 51) paired up with the existence of state funded universities with no or symbolic tuition fees, SEEU has to ensure its sustainability only based on the quality. It is therefore very relevant to test the existing QA system and be sure about the future activities with this regard.

Methodology

The methodological approach consists of analyzing the existing data from certain quality initiatives and instruments in order to see if and what improvements they have brought and how they are contributing towards increasing the University societal impact.

The assumption is that increased quality of teaching and learning, including preparation for the job market and practical application of the knowledge acquired, will lead to increased motivation for innovative thinking and entrepreneurship activities and increased student employability.

The quality of teaching and learning is measured by student evaluation trends – average University results from student evaluation in hard copy, starting from 2009, on a scale from 1 to 4 and average University results from the online student survey of academic courses applied from the academic 2017/2018 on a scale from 1 to 5.

Student motivation for engagement in innovation and entrepreneurship activities is measured through the number of start up companies (tenants) within the University Technology Park in the period from 2013 to 2019.

Data about student employment in the period from 2007 to 2018 are examined in order to see how well SEEU students rate on the job market. This is considered as an important indicator about the skills and knowledge acquired during their studies.

Findings

The results from student evaluation of academic courses, indicating the quality of teaching and learning are presented in Figure 1. After the first results of measuring the quality of teaching and learning from students' side, the University invested in areas where points for improvement had been noticed, such as, for example, the use of the institutional course management system 'Libri'. The trends are positive in all other points that have been measured.

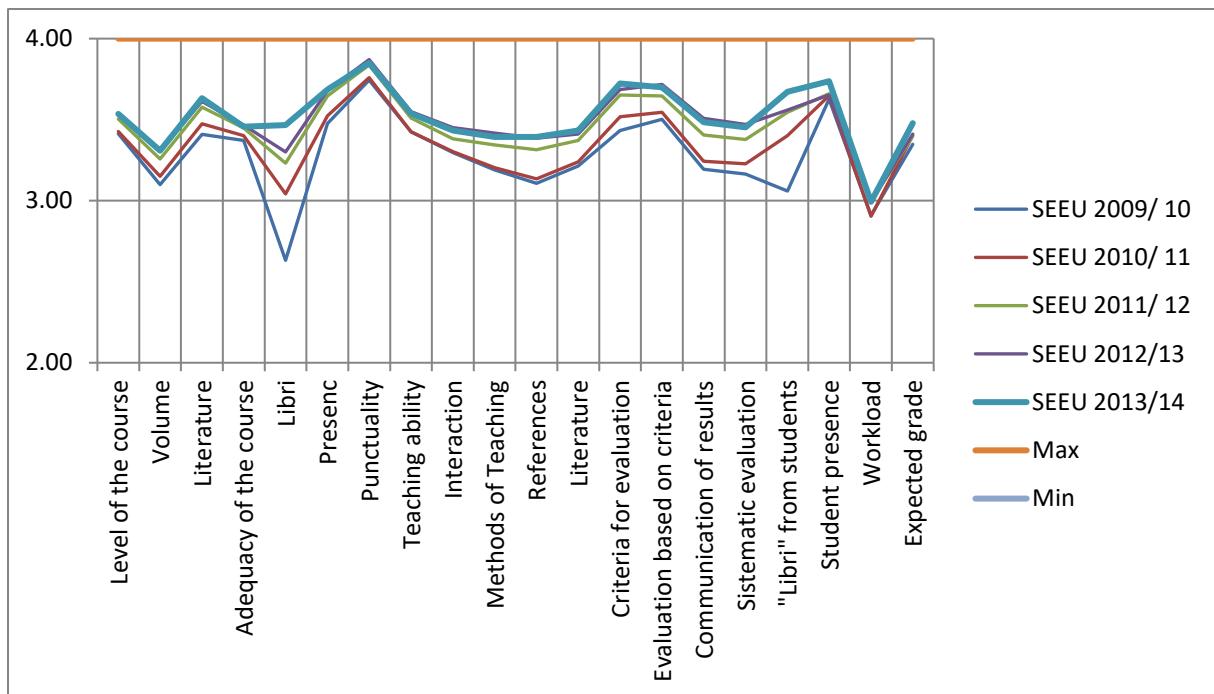


Figure 1. Student evaluation results (hard copies) from 2009 – 2014



Similar results can be seen in Figure 2, for academic years of 2017/18 and 2018/2019 after certain modification of the instrument and introduction of online evaluation on a scale from 1 to 5.

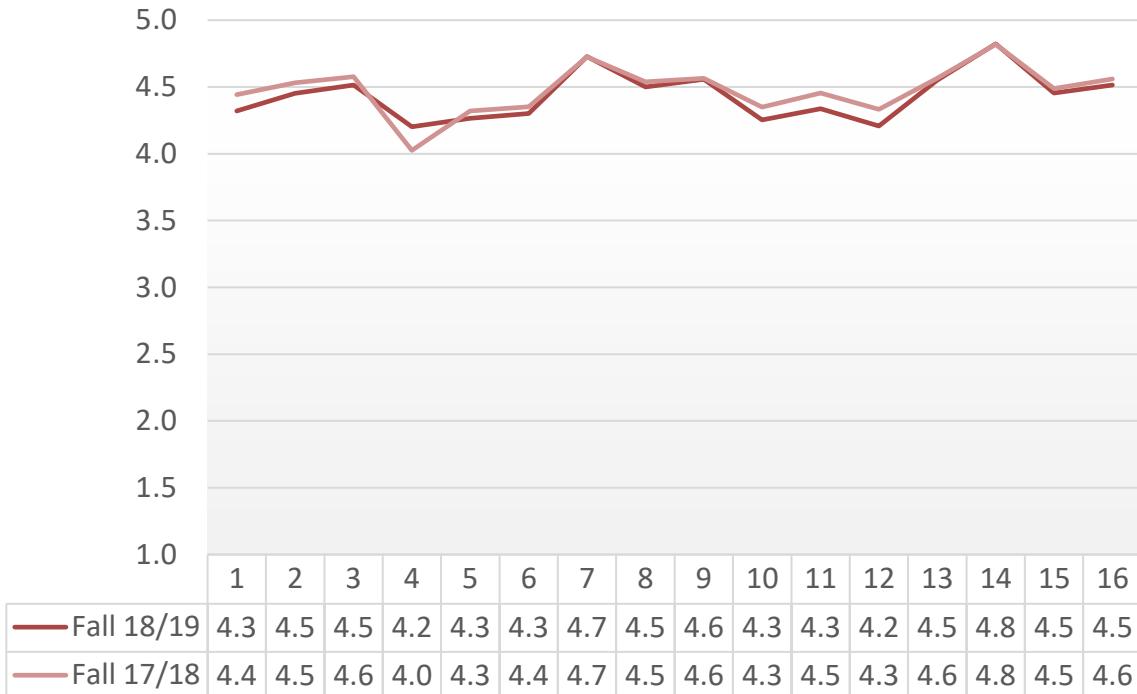


Figure 2. University average from online student evaluation in the last two academic years

The second measured area is student innovation and entrepreneurship activities. In 2013, the University established a Technology Park as the first of this kind not only in the country, but in the whole region. From the very establishment, the Technology Park has shown great results. In Figure 3, we can see that in 2013 it had only two small firms with 5 employees, but as of June 2019, it includes 12 enterprises with 116 employees. All of the enterprises have been founded by SEEU students and most of the employees are SEEU students.

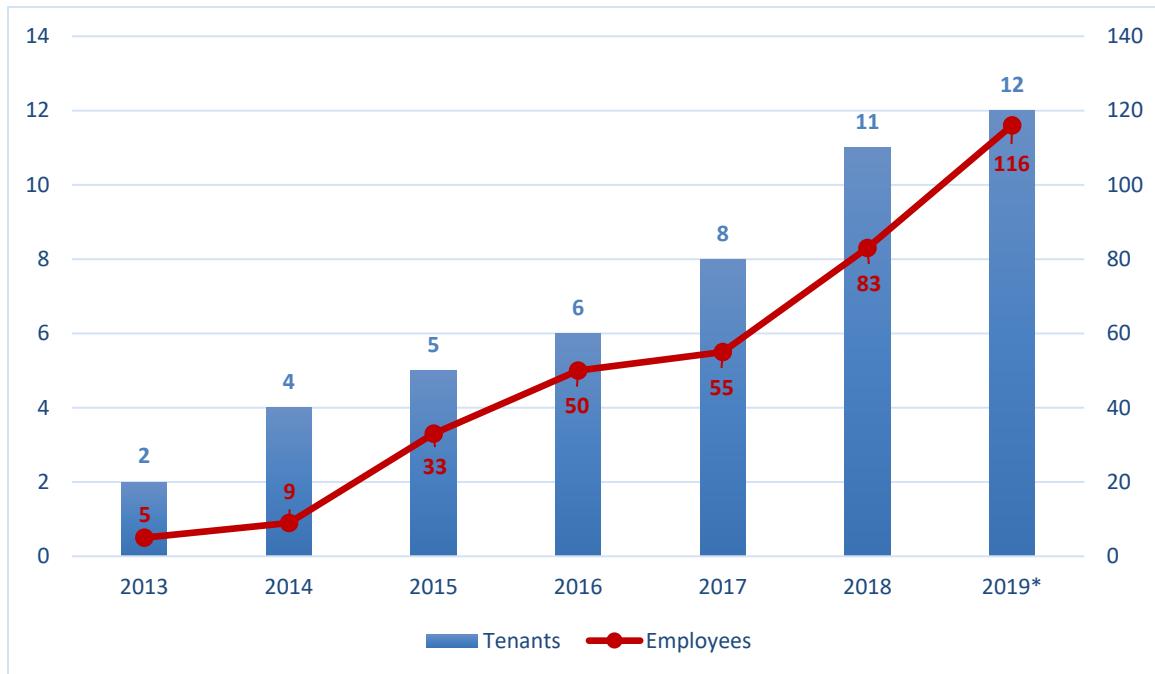


Figure 3. Number of tenant companies and employees at the SEEU Technology Park

Figure 4 shows the level of employability of SEEU students in the first year after graduation. Thus in 2018 the employability was about 61 % increasing from 45% in 2010.

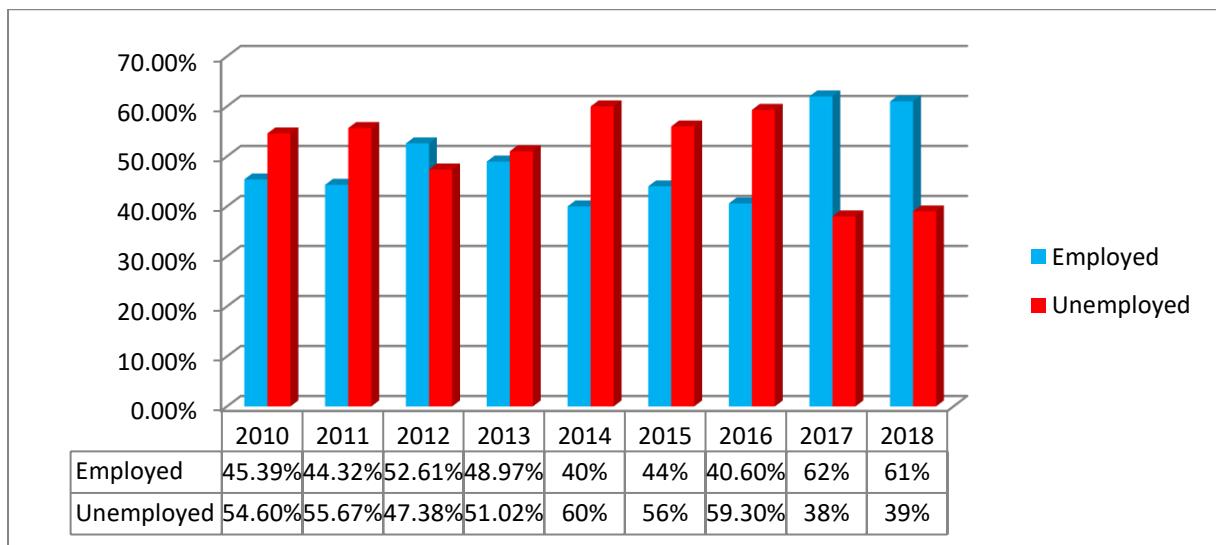


Figure 4. SEEU Alumni Employment Rate (2010-2018)

It is very important to note that, as shown in Figure 5, SEEU graduates are mostly employed in the private sector (64% in 2018). This is an important indicator of the quality of their preparation as in a still highly politicised society, public sector employment is not merit based, but it is gained through political affiliation and personal networking and connections.

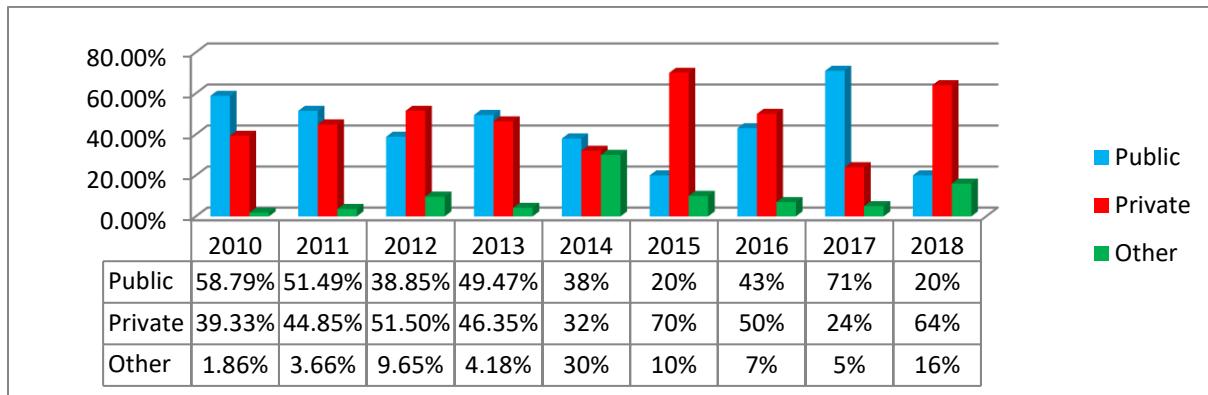


Figure 5. SEEU Alumni sector of employment

Conclusions

It is obvious that the QA system at SEEU works well for the time being. The University has been a pioneer in establishing and operating such a system in the country and the region and things have not run smoothly all the time. There have been and still are obstacles from both internal and external factors. Internally, a lot of good will is still needed in order to further develop the University quality culture and change people's mindset for openness, self criticism and self reflection while being surrounded by disloyal competition from state funded, open access Universities. However, all these challenges are worth. There are positive trends in student evaluation rates, reflecting the quality of learning and teaching. This is the core University activity and the main pre condition for justifying its mission to benefit the society.

Improved teaching and learning with all the components included such as, for example: preparation of syllabi, methodologies for student centred learning, ways of providing feedback and organizing assessment, materials used etc. lead to better student preparation for work and career development. As shown through analysis of results from the three categories that have been measured, the positive development in the category of teaching and learning directs to increased student capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship, observed by the number of student initiated start up companies and general student employment rate. The main conclusion is that SEEU is on a good way. Its QA system is mature and it contributes towards creating a socially responsible higher education institution that serves the society properly.

Nonetheless, challenges do exist. Some of the processes might become mechanical throughout the years and thus perceived as purely administrative and not motivating. Novelty and changes should be introduced and the instruments constantly tested and improved. Then, special attention is needed in order not to turn quality enhancement into quality control as sometimes there is a small difference between them. For instance, the University utilizes additional instruments besides those mentioned previously: observation of teaching and learning with classroom visits in announced and unannounced way; measurement of individual research activities, measurement of online activities and 'presence' in the online platforms used to facilitate teaching and learning etc. The ultimate aim is to motivate and award the best performers but this kind of performance management might be also seen as an excessive control. Yet, there is awareness that this is the only way to move towards becoming a modern European university that can be attractive for both domestic students going abroad and for international students participating in exchange programs.

Recommendations

SEEU approach to QA consists of many different activities and only few of them have been mentioned and analysed in this paper. It is an art of functioning, cherished from the top management and going downwards to the pyramid base. This model, although not perfect, should be followed by other higher education institutions in the country and the region as it functions in specific conditions characteristic for



former socialist countries. It is still not completely matching the QA system at university level in more developed countries, but it employs the maximum capacity of an institution in specific circumstances: limited financial resources, rigid legislation and universities functioning isolated from the labour market. Because of these facts, such a model could be resembled and used by other institutions, since it is an example of a good performance management. It values achievements, responsibility and high commitment from all involved parties and has established instruments for measuring them. This is especially beneficial at the period when reforms are needed for more successful EU integration processes at all levels of functioning of a society.

Where do we go from this point? What else can we do? How can we further strengthen the role of QA without making the process bureaucratic? What can we do to maintain the already established institutional quality culture in balance with the national legislation? These are some of the questions on which reflection and further action is needed.

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