

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

SUITABLE MODEL OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE, AT SARAJEVO UNIVERSITY

Produced by:

Mia Sidran, Haris Abaspahic and Nejra Nuna Cengic

Introduction

The issue of the quality of higher education and the role of Higher Education Institutions in promoting and assuring quality is officially recognized within the Bologna process by the Berlin Communiqué¹ through which ministers of European countries commit themselves to “supporting the further development of higher education quality assurance at institutional, national and European level”². Various models of quality assurance in higher education exist throughout Europe and they differ in their formal setting, criteria and methodologies.

From the signing of the Bologna Declaration, the role of students in quality assurance has been a topic of discussion on the institutional, national and international level. At the Prague Ministerial Summit student involvement was identified as one of the most important topics for future discussions within the Bologna Process and the Norwegian Ministry took the initiative to organize a follow-up seminar. This is why more than 100 representatives, hosted by the Norwegian Royal Ministry for Education and Research, gathered in Oslo in June 2003. All conclusions from this seminar underlined the need for the strengthening of the role of students within decision-making bodies, as well as student associations.

Being a partner within an educational institution affords an opportunity to create a system that would reflect students’ needs. In many universities with a developed quality assurance culture and education, students are now seen as one of the key partners in assuring quality in education. “Students are the ones for whom education has primarily been designed. They are the ones dealing with it day in and day out over several years. This makes them real experts on QA; students know best what their (ideal) education and study environment should look like”.³ As such they have a true interest in the evaluation of higher education.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, like many other former-communist countries does not have a practice of effective student involvement, as well as developed system of quality control. Although student unions function within departments/university, the level of student activism through those unions, and student influence on the educational process, are very limited or even non-existent. Although the Framework Law on Higher Education (not yet adopted) provides a framework for an alternative role for students - participation of students in

¹ European University Association, EUA’s Policy Position in the Context of the Berlin Communiqué, April 14, 2004. <http://www.eua.be>

² “Realizing the European Higher Education Area”, Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003, available at <http://aec.cramgo.nl/uploadmedia%5CBerlin%20Communiqué%202003.pdf>, 2/7

³ “European Student Handbook in Quality Assurance in Higher Education”. ESIB, available at <http://www.esib.org/projects/qap/QAhandbook/>

decision-making bodies and student participation in the evaluation process within departments⁴ - it is still not clear how to implement it.

In this respect this study aims to develop an optimal model of student involvement in university governance and quality assurance at the University of Sarajevo. The aim of enhancing the role of students within the University is that it is likely to improve the quality of education within the University of Sarajevo, as well as meet the Bologna standards to which Sarajevo University is a signatory. In order to propose an effective model of student participation, this study will explore different models. The aim of the analysis is to identify good practices/procedures and explore how they would work if applied to the present structure and existing conditions of the University of Sarajevo. An optimal model for the University of Sarajevo is to be developed in order to ensure meaningful student participation under the present circumstances.

Ensuring adequate student participation in all aspects of higher education processes is a crucial precondition for the implementation of the Bologna standards in higher education. Furthermore, one of the goals of higher education is to strengthen the development of active, critical and productive citizens. A democratic academic community and democratic student organizations are important sites for developing these qualities. This is the reason why “a democratic, partnership-based relationship between the administration of Higher Education Institutions, staff, students and student organizations is hugely important in the creation of a democratic environment that is more than just a system which administers all these organizations.”⁵ Higher education is more than just a product or a service because it has an important role in the general development of society.⁶

Methodology

This paper is composed of four main sections, with a number of sub-sections. The first section elaborates on the basic concept of Quality Control and Assurance, its role within the Bologna Process, and the role given to students within this Process. A profile of Sarajevo University, with a special focus on formal provisions and actual student participation in decision-making processes and quality assurance, is elaborated on in the second section. Best practices in procedures ensuring effective student participation within different universities are presented in the third section of this paper, while the final section outlines the necessary procedures for meaningful student participation at the Sarajevo University, under present circumstances.

Our research methodology combines the **content-analysis method** applied to various pieces of legislation, communiqués, universities’ internal acts, self-evaluation reports of universities, external evaluation reports performed by recognized national and international organizations, interest groups and individual experts, student union leaflets, magazines etc.; the **focus-group method**, specifically performed for this research, using a sample of 18 students enrolled at Sarajevo University (from different departments and different years of study), with the aim of determining their perception of various aspects of how the University functions; and **interviews** conducted with the managing staff of student unions operating

⁴ Council of Europe (18 December 2003). *Framework Law on Higher Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Final version of the Council of Europe

⁵ “Students’ Rights – Human Rights”, ESIB – The National Union of Students in Europe. available at: www.esib.org/poliies/human_rights-student_rights.htm, 3/3

⁶ General Report, Bologna Follow-up Seminar. “Student participation in Governance in Higher Education, Oslo, Norway, 12/14 June 2003, <http://www.esib.org/documents/studentpart-generalreport.pdf>; 10/15

within Sarajevo University. In addition, a comparative approach was applied in analysing good procedures ensuring effective student participation within different universities.

Main findings

The main findings of the research are:

- Lack of (or inadequate) legal framework for student involvement in quality control and decision-making bodies
- Lack of formal provisions for a quality control system within the university
- Lack of standardized norms, rules and procedures in almost every part of the University's and departments' operations (for example: there is no examination policy, there is no standard lecturing policy, there is no policy related to support of student unions/associations etc).
- Infrequent dissemination of questionnaires to students without any kind of standardized system of implementing results
- No culture of standardization and the creation of transparent and efficient policies in the University of Sarajevo
- A huge gap between formal and actual student participation
- Huge distance between academic staff and students
- Weak student organizations
- A great deal of uncertainty among participants about membership, lack of knowledge about elections in managing bodies, what kind of managing bodies exist within the university etc.
- Some of the existing unions are shaped by the personal interests of the students who are leading them, which often generates resistance towards such a method of self-organization
- Student apathy, a lack of interest in taking part in governance process and procedures, in the work of student organizations
- Lack of knowledge among students about their rights

Student Participation in Higher Education, Best Practices

In order to recommend an effective model of student participation, this study explores different cases studies of best practices of student participation in higher education in three European countries: Sweden, Germany and Hungary. Although, there are many other examples of best practices in Europe, these three cases have been chosen to illustrate the best practices in three areas:

1. A high level of student participation in the quality assurance system of higher education both on the national and institutional level as shown by the example of Sweden
2. A high level of student participation and influence in decision-making bodies of higher education institutions as shown by the example of Germany, and
3. A high level of student self-organization as a precondition for influencing decision-making processes in the quality of higher education and in the institution more generally

This is not to say that each case is lacking or excluding the other two areas. On the contrary, where there is a highly efficient system of student participation in higher education,

all three areas are interlinked and interdependent. Therefore, the case of Hungary demonstrates well the necessity of well-organized and proactive student organizations in post-communist countries in which higher education is in transition from a strong “traditionally communist” higher education system to one that is compatible with the European Higher Education Area. Well-organized and proactive student organizations in Hungary are seen as a precondition for gaining more influence for students over legislation and a quality assurance system in higher education. The case of Germany represents a highly developed model of student representation in the decision-making bodies of higher education institutions, in which emphasis is given to representation of students in university governing bodies as necessary to counterbalance other very important higher education stakeholders (i.e. professors and administrative staff). The case of Sweden illustrates well that this highly developed system of student participation at all levels, and especially where students meaningfully influence quality assurance in higher education, was set as a condition by legal framework securing student participation in decision-making bodies and a high degree of student organization.

The study explores how these models could be applied to the present structure and situation of the University of Sarajevo. An optimal model for the University of Sarajevo will be developed in order to ensure meaningful student participation under the present circumstances.

Recommendations and benefits of proposed model

1. National level

- 1. Student Participation in all higher education governing bodies.** The law should prescribe that three student representatives actively participate (and have a right to vote) in the work of a Higher Education Group established within the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The law should establish that a reasonable number of student representatives participate in the work of University Senates, Boards of Directors/Treasuries, Supervisory Boards and Rectorates. The law should prescribe that Representatives in university governing bodies are appointed by the University Student Union, and that they have the right to vote. Moreover, the voting system in these bodies should be such that student representatives are not a weak minority. The same principles should apply to student representation in the departmental governing bodies, particularly on the Scientific Council. The student representative on these bodies appoints the Departments’ Student Union.
- 2. System of Student Unions.** The law should define the basic principles of student organizations on the national, university and departmental level. A National Student Union (or federation of entities’ student unions) should be established. The members of that Union should be members of university unions. The National Student Union should represent student interests in BiH. The National Student Union should delegate three representatives to the Ministry of Civil Affairs who will participate in the work of the Higher Education Group established within the Ministry. The basic operational costs of the union should be covered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The law should prescribe the basic principles of the functioning of the universities’ student unions which stipulates that: (a) the University Student Union represents the interests of the universities’ students; (b) the president of the union is directly elected by all students on an annual basis; (c) half of the general union assembly members are directly elected and the other half are appointed by departmental unions; and (d) universities’ student unions are financed by membership fees and from university budgets. The law

should also define the basic rules of student organizations on the departmental level as follows: (a) students are required by law to be members of the student union in their departments; (b) the president and general assembly are directly elected on an annual basis by all students from the respective department; and (c) university student unions are financed by membership fees and from departmental budgets.

- 3. Quality Assurance System and External Accreditation Agency.** The establishment of the National Higher Education Quality Assurance System is an important precondition for the introduction of other Bologna Standards, and consequently the integration of BiH's higher education into the European Higher Education Area. The creation of a National Accreditation Agency as the highest authority in a quality assurance and control system will take place in BiH soon. Different models of such an agency exist in European countries (in some cases the agency is established as a fully independent body, in other cases the agency is a part of the Ministry for Education). However, the main role of the Agency is to externally evaluate the quality of higher education institutions, and to provide an accreditation for those who fulfill the quality standards. The National Law on a quality assurance and control system in higher education in BiH that should be adopted as part of broader higher education reforms in BiH, should prescribe the establishment of a National Accreditation Agency. The same law should ensure adequate participation of students in the work of the Agency and in the whole system of quality assurance and control. This law should stipulate that as a part of the National Accreditation Agency, a student council should be established. The Student Council should be composed of a representative of the National Student Union and of a representative from each university student union. The Student Council delegates their representative to the bodies that are responsible for evaluation planning and implementation of self-evaluation. All the strategic decisions of the Accreditation Agency should be accepted in consultation with the Student Council. The Student Council is responsible for the establishment of mechanisms that should ensure adequate student participation (not only of union representatives' participation, but broader student involvement) in external panels and in the follow-up of evaluations.

Informal student participation in the governance of the higher education on the national level

Thus formal provisions for student participation in higher education governance according to the national legislation presented above, and mechanisms for informal participation in higher education affairs within the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Agency for Accreditation, should be put into practice. Mechanisms for broader student participation in the work of the Group for Education and Accreditation should include student debates, student focus-groups, and periodically conducted surveys, related to all the major decisions of the Ministry and the Agency.

2. University Level

Taking into account that the university is at present a very weak institution and that major reforms of the higher education system (including the introduction of a system of adequate student participation) will be initiated at the national level, the recommendations put forward focus on preparation of the university's structures for their more powerful future position in higher educational processes and in particular in the quality assurance and control system; and

on the more active role of students in these processes. The University's internal acts should closely regulate the following areas:

1. **Student participation in the University's governing bodies.** The national legal regulations will require that a reasonable number of student representatives participate in the work of the University Senates, Boards of Directors/Treasuries, Supervisory Boards and Rectorates. Moreover, the same law will not allow student representatives to act only as observers of decision-making process within the University. Based on national legislation, the university's internal acts should more precisely develop mechanisms to avoid marginalization of student representatives in decision-making process within these bodies. These mechanisms should identify the percentages of votes allocated to student representatives per university body and each area of the university's work. These mechanisms should be developed by the Senate in partnership with the university's student union and be incorporated into the University's formal acts. A model for the participation of departmental union representatives in departmental governing bodies should be prescribed by the university's internal regulations including: (a) the number of student representatives in each departmental body; and (b) a voting system within departmental governing bodies that provides optimal influence for the student representatives.
2. **Student Unions.** National legislation will prescribe the basic principles for the functioning of university student unions and departmental unions such as:
 - The president of the university's union and half of the union's general assembly members are directly elected; and the other half of assembly members are appointed by departmental unions.
 - The president and the general assembly of each departmental union are directly elected.
 - University student unions are financed by membership fees and by university budgets.
 - Departmental unions are financed by membership fees and by departmental budgets.

Internal university regulations should develop more detailed procedures related to the election of student representatives within the system of student unions. Elections should take a place on an annual basis and be organized by departmental unions. The voting and appointing system should be developed with special attention to the strengthening of democratic principles within the union. The system should be developed and adopted by the university's student union and the Rectorate/Senate and be integrated into the internal regulations of the university and the departments. Moreover, the annual financial plan for the unions' work should be proposed by the union and adopted by the Rectorate. Major sources for financing the unions (to be defined by national law) are partly through student membership fees collected by departmental unions, and partly from the university budget (the exact portion of the budget allocated for basic operational costs should be defined in the university's Statute). The student union has the right to propose other income-generation activities directly related to the university's work such as management of the university's library, the university's internet centers, the university's cafeteria etc. Internal regulations in the university should also prescribe that departmental unions are financed from their membership fees and the departmental budget. Departmental governing bodies should provide other income-generation

opportunities for their union. The university union is obliged by internal organization acts to periodically conduct student opinion polls, organize regular student debates, and regularly inform the whole student population about their work.

- 3. Quality Assurance System and Self-Evaluation.** An important part of the quality assurance system is the university's self-evaluation and a follow-up of that process. Implementation of the quality assurance system requires student participation in the self-evaluation, including periodic evaluation of teaching staff, courses etc. The University of Sarajevo has already established a team for self-evaluation, but students are not adequately represented on that team. The university's internal regulations that cover the establishment and control of quality assurance within the University of Sarajevo should incorporate mechanisms for adequate student participation in these processes including: (a) an adequate number of students participating in the work of the quality assurance team, delegated by the university's student union; (b) the development of mechanisms and procedures which will ensure that the student influence in decision-making processes within that team is evident; and (c) the introduction of a practice of broader student participation (student debates, forums, student opinion polls, etc) related to major decisions of the quality assurance team within the university.

3. Departmental level

Currently, departments are the most powerful decision-making bodies within the higher education system in BiH and in the University of Sarajevo as well. Moreover, there is a clear lack of standardized practice of student participation in departmental affairs. As a result, the level of student participation in governance varies dramatically between departments, and the overall level of student participation and their influence on departmental affairs are far from ideal.

National legislation and the university's internal regulations clearly set out principles and mechanisms for: student participation in governance, how the student union system functions, and the role of students in the system of quality assurance and control. Therefore the role of departmental bodies and internal departmental regulations is to make these principles and mechanisms fully operational.

Student participation in departmental governance

National regulations and the university's internal acts have set out in detail mechanisms covering the number of student representatives (delegated by departmental student unions) that participate in the work of departments governing bodies (particularly the Scientific Council) and voting mechanisms that grant enough influence to student representatives in those bodies. These principles and mechanisms should be incorporated and more developed (as is needed) in the departments' internal acts. Moreover, departments are responsible for ensuring that these mechanisms are applied and carried out to the full.

Departmental student unions

Departmental student unions represent the crucial level at which students organize themselves. They are responsible for articulating student interests and representing them directly on the departmental level and indirectly (through delegating student representatives)

on higher levels of higher education (university and national levels). However, the framework for student organizations on the departmental level has been created by national legislation and the university's internal regulations (described above). The departmental governing bodies are obliged to incorporate and make fully operational those principles and mechanisms for students organizations in the department's internal acts. The following areas of the student union's work should be incorporated into the department's internal regulations: (a) the election process (election of the departments' union president and general assembly; election of the university's union's president and the directly-elected university's union assembly members); (b) departmental union financing (membership fees, departmental budgets allocated to the union, other sources of possible financing such as managing the department's library, internet centers, and cafeterias etc.); and (c) the departmental governing structure should incorporate in the internal regulations support mechanisms to the department's student union for organizing student elections.

Student unions should incorporate in their internal acts mechanisms which will continuously ensure and broaden student participation in the unions' affairs such as: student debates, student information campaigns, presentations of the unions' work, periodically conducting student opinion polls, etc.

Quality assurance system and student participation on the departmental level

External evaluation of quality assurance and control is centered at the national level, and internal self-evaluation and quality assurance is centered and regulated at the university level. Therefore, student participation is regulated by national legislation and the university's internal acts, and is the responsibility of the national student union as well as the university's student unions.

However, the establishment of a quality assurance and control system within the University of Sarajevo has required the creation of self-evaluation teams for each department. The participation of student representatives in those teams should be regulated and incorporated into internal acts in the same way as has been done on the university level (described above).

4. Benefits

- Strong legal regulation of student participation covering all levels of the higher education system (national, university and departmental level) will ensure strong formal rights for students to become partners in the higher education process.
- The formal students' right to substantially participate in student unions in all the higher education governing bodies (including the bodies responsible for the establishment and control of the quality system) will strengthen the influence of student unions.
- The right of student unions to participate in the decision-making process together with the proposed model for unions' financing (which will ensure the financial sustainability and independence of unions) will stimulate students to participate both directly and indirectly in the work of student unions.
- Direct student participation in the work of unions (holding different positions within unions and directly participating in the higher education decision-making process) will

become very appealing and relevant both for higher education institutions and students.

- More and more students will be interested in holding a position within the unions and the resultant competition between union representatives will increase the quality of the unions' work.
- Improve the quality of union services and the overall quality of the university's performance.
- Interest in indirectly participating (in elections, public debates etc.) in union affairs will increase the participation of the entire student body in higher education affairs.
- Active student participation will push the transition of higher education towards a system that is more student-oriented and more representative of real needs, resulting in an improvement in the overall quality of higher education.
- Such a system ensures an increase in the student body's ownership over the higher education system, consequently effecting ever more active participation in the learning process which will inevitably improve students' performance (lower average of exam failures, shorter average time needed to complete a degree etc.).
- It will create a more effective, viable and less costly higher education system.
- The students will have a more active role in the learning process, the number of exam failures will decrease, and the teaching staff will have a weight lifted from their shoulders. They will have more time for research and other developmental activities.
- The development and implementation of the proposed model with adequate participation of students in higher education will nurture the future participatory citizen who will be the pillar of a modern, pluralistic, democratic and developed society.