



# **GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF KOSOVO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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*This project was funded through a grant from the US Embassy in Pristina and administered by KUSA. The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed therein are those of the author (s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the State Department.*

## **Foreword**

Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) has successfully secured the support of the U.S Embassy in Kosovo for funding of the project *Increasing student participation in internal and external quality assurance processes in Kosovo*. The aim of the project was to encourage student participation in activities related to quality assurance (QA) which in turn will contribute to the improvement of the teaching and the learning process. According to the project, increasing student's involvement in QA will promote the alignment of the Kosovar higher education sector with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries and thus guarantee a participatory design and implementation of the learning process. Hence, increased awareness and involvement of students in internal QA processes, will facilitate student's involvement in external QA which will contribute to the fulfillment of KAA Strategic Plan and ENQA recommendations.

The goals of the project were defined as follows:

1. To increase awareness of students about the importance of student's involvement in internal QA processes;
2. To encourage and support Higher Education Institutions to actively involve students in QA processes;
3. To support the implementation of KAA Strategic Plan with respect to student's involvement in external quality assurance.

The present document is based on an international benchmarking of best practice in Europe, an analysis of the policy in the EHEA, a national diagnosis assessment of the applicable legislation, KAA accreditation reports, as well as a national survey conducted amongst more than 1000 students from both public and private Kosovar higher education institutions (HEIs); finally, the project draws from the professional experience of the project team, made of national and international experts.

## **I. Context, scope, concepts and principles**

### **Context**

Since the 1990s, the role of students in the quality assurance of higher education has become recognised across Europe as being both necessary and desirable (Cockburn 2006). The involvement of students has been in various forms and at various levels. Students are involved within the quality assurance processes of their own higher education institutions, as part of the quality assurance of institutions and programmes by outside bodies; but also in the review of the quality assurance of those bodies themselves (Williams, 2006).

With the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), initially referred to as the Bologna Process, students have been recognised as crucial stakeholders who should take part in shaping their education and overall learning experience. The Prague Communiqué signed by the all EHEA Ministers of Education declared that students are to be considered full members of the higher education community.

The Berlin Communiqué, 2003, expressed an unconditional approval of student participation in higher education governance: *Ministers note the constructive participation of student organisations in the Bologna Process and underline the necessity to include the*

*students continuously and at an early stage in further activities. Students are full partners in higher education governance. Ministers note that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place throughout the European Higher Education Area. They also call on institutions and student organisations to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance.*

In 2018, the Paris Communiqué included students' participation as one of the fundamental values of the process. Subsequently, the other ministerial Communiqués have increasingly made commitments for student engagement, determining therefore a major wave of European Countries that are scaling up student engagement in higher education governance generally, but also in quality assurance (QA) in particular.

As members of the academic community, students involved in the governance of higher education actively and evidently contribute to the development of policies as they are the ones benefiting directly from this public good, while also contributing to raising awareness on how different approaches can be implemented to achieve common goals. Students' participation is not only fundamental for the well-being of democratic institutions but also for our democratic society as a whole (Bologna with Students Eyes 2020, 2021).

## **Scope and concepts**

The present document does not prescribe how the student engagement in internal and external quality assurance of Kosovo Higher Education should happen, but it aims to provide guidance on how students can contribute to quality provision and learning environments in higher education. The guidelines should also be used as a reference point when determining higher education legislation, accreditation provisions and institutional level regulations, and it is also desirable for national stakeholders and higher education institutions to contribute to their successful implementation and enforcement in practice.

The guidelines should be considered in a broader context that also understands and respects the diversity of higher education institutions - regardless of their type of ownership, funding and size - which may find proxies and additional avenues for active student engagement; however, this diversity in the profile of the institutions should not be used as an excuse for lack of student engagement in governance and quality assurance.

The focus of this document is quality assurance as an integrated and horizontal concept that works as the backbone of any higher education institution, which covers the whole range of institutional activities and units; therefore, the guidelines advocate for student engagement in the quality assurance of both academic and non-academic areas, including governance, strategic planning, policy-making, administration, among others.

A conceptual distinction between involvement and engagement of students in quality assurance should be made:

- Astin (1984) has described student involvement as the amount of physical and physiological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience, a definition referring to behavior and what students actually do rather than what they think or how they feel or the meanings they give to their experiences;
- Trowler and Trowler (2011) define student engagement as: the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and

development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution. Furthermore, Kuh et al. (2007) described student engagement as the participation in educationally effective practices both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes. They also stated that student engagement represents two critical features: the time and effort students put into their studies and other educational purposeful activities; and how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to encourage students to participate in activities that lead to the experience-desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation.

Although student engagement and student involvement might seem to be the same, this is not the case. Although similar in meaning they have a qualitative difference between them. A student for instance might be involved but not actively engaged. The former refers to a situation whereby for example a student who runs for a role in an organization attends a meeting and follows the discussion. The latter refers to a student who runs for a role in an organization yet he attends meetings, voices his concerns and participates actively in the discussion (Kuh et al.2007).

## **Principles**

The present document is based on a set of principles which can assist institutions in developing a culture of engagement to embed the student in both governance and quality assurance. The principles are proposed with a conviction that proactive institutional leadership – including senior management and students representatives – are the *sine qua non* of an active and welcoming approach to student engagement.

These principles are informed in part by the pillars of the student movement (European Students Union, 2009) and the Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education (Higher Education Authority, 2016).

Student engagement in higher education governance and quality assurance should be based on the following principles.

### **1. Independence**

Students should be able to express their views autonomously, without fear of repercussion or attempt of influencing their opinions. When elections for student representatives are conducted, these should be organized by the students themselves, without the involvement of the institution or other stakeholders. The higher education institutions can, where needed, support students with logistic, administrative and organizational capacities, but this must be done in a way that ensures full autonomy of the student body to elect their legitimate representatives.

The activity of student representatives should be conducted without any influence from alumni, the HEI, political parties, or any other stakeholder.

### **2. Openness**

Engaging students in the development of higher education should be an opportunity available for all students, regardless of their academic performance, year and programme of study, mode of delivery, financial status, gender, or any other discriminatory criteria. Likewise, all students must have the right to vote and to be elected for elected positions.

### **3. Democracy**

Institutions will adhere to democratic principles, and will encourage these principles in staff, students, and in wider society. In elected roles, the representatives should be elected by all the students at the corresponding level (e.g. Students in the Senate/Academic Council to be elected by all the students at institutional level) and should be able to voice their position and vote on all matters.

### **4. Representativeness**

In their engagement roles, students will seek to build and maintain effective communication channels with their electorate, both in collecting opinions that they later have to have an official stance on, as well as in disseminating decisions they had access to which impact the student population. In their elected roles, students have the obligation to ensure that the opinions they support are based on the electorate consultation and are not influenced by any third party (institutional management, alumni, political parties, etc).

### **5. Transparency**

Institutions will be transparent in the life-cycle of their decision-making processes, while students will be transparent in their internal lines of governance, and in the relationship between the elected roles and the student population.

The process of election for student representatives should be based on open and transparent calls; student representatives will also develop and maintain precise regulations that ensure the formality of the process – providing the exact rights, responsibilities and obligations for students' representatives, the length of the mandate for each position, mention of the decision making avenues of representation, etc.

Student representatives will also ensure that suitable measures are in place to facilitate knowledge transfer from year to year and general capacity building of involved students and student representatives.

### **6. Integrity**

Institutions should promote and enable the integrity of students and other stakeholders; student representatives should be understanding, accepting and choosing to act in compliance with the principles included in this section, consistently demonstrating honesty, fairness and decency and acting in firm adherence to a code of especially moral values.

### **7. Student as partner**

The implications of perceiving students as partners, rather than as consumers or clients are substantial and deep. The student as a partner is an active member of an institution with which they share a strong sense of allegiance and commitment. This implies not only seeking student contribution in decisional, strategic, consultative and executive avenues of representation, but also assuming a genuine understanding that a student perspective can bring added value to quality enhancement at all levels.

### **8. Inclusivity and diversity**

Institutions will actively seek to gain insights and contributions from all sectors of the academic community in their governance and decision-making processes. This will go beyond the formal legislative requirements, to provide a myriad formal and informal engagement opportunities. As local institutions and national authorities become more socially and culturally diverse, students will work to ensure that the diverse nature of the

student body is safeguarded in their representation activities by taking care that the composition of the representative bodies at the very least mirrors the level of diversity of the general population.

### **9. Students as co-creators**

Students will be expected to take responsibility for their own learning and for their partner role in the governance and quality assurance of higher education. This implies students not only being a valuable source of feedback on the quality of their learning experiences and a source of unique perspective on the educational process, but also a reliable partner with an operational role in the processes of design, innovation and implementation. Local institutions and national authorities will embrace the active involvement from the students.

### **10. Collegiality and parity of esteem**

Local institutions, national authorities and student representatives will promote collegiality between staff and students across the academic sector. Central to collegiality is the development of an open and trustful relationship between individual staff and students within higher education.

### **11. Professionalism and support**

Students and their representatives will contribute fully and act in a professional manner when they are involved in the structures and processes of the HEI. This professionalism is the joint responsibility of the institution and student representatives. The institution will recognise that staff and student members on committees may have different life experiences and areas of expertise but all are equally valued in the ongoing evolution of the institution. It will be the responsibility of the institution to provide the necessary support to the student representatives as to enable them to fulfill their role.

### **12. Feedback and feedback loop**

Institutions will welcome and encourage open and prompt feedback from students. Suitable measures will be put in place across the institution to ensure that students are facilitated in providing feedback in a safe and valued manner. Feedback practices will be transparent and the feedback loop will be closed in a timely fashion; the measures taken by the institution in response to student feedback will also benefit from efforts in dissemination and transparency.

### **13. Self-criticism and enhancement**

Student representatives and institutions will continue to be self-analytical and self-critical of their student engagement practices. They will use evidence-based techniques to assess, critique and, based on this, continuously advance the effectiveness of their strategies for building a culture of engagement.

### **14. Consistency**

Institutions and student representatives will ensure that the values and practices with regard to student engagement are applied consistently across institutions, and should put procedures in place to allow departments to share good practice measures, as well as stimulate exchange of experiences between student representatives.

## **II. Guidelines for student engagement in internal quality assurance**

## **1. Student engagement in HEI governance**

In line with the KAA Accreditation Manual (KAA, 2018), student representatives are equal members of all strategic, decisional, executive and consultative bodies at institutional, faculty and departmental levels. Student representation is effectively encouraged in the formal and informal areas of governance, and is organized in line with the principles enlisted under Section 1 of this document.

In cases where the institutions are facing legislative challenges in integrating students as full members (with voting powers) of strategic, decisional, executive and consultative bodies at both institutional and faculty levels, arrangements will be made for temporary observatory status of student members. Under such transitory arrangements, engaging the student voice can be facilitated by supporting the constructive development of a culture where students can express their voice in formal meetings, regardless of their formal membership status.

In institutions that deliver education in branch campuses, the engagement of students enrolled in the branch(es) must also be incorporated.

Taking into consideration that the notion of student participation and engagement in Kosovo higher education is in its inception, there is an ethical obligation of handing over the knowledge acquired while a student representative, independently of who is going to be the next legitimate student representative. This will contribute to capacity building and continuity of institutional memory in student representation matters. Furthermore, mechanisms of assuring accountability, transparency and the flow of information to the other student representatives and the general student population should be given special attention.

## **2. Student engagement in quality assurance governance structures**

There is student representation in all formal and informal quality assurance committees at institutional, faculty and departmental levels; this is organized in line with the principles enlisted under Section 1 of this document. It is of key importance for the students and higher education institutions to clearly understand each other's objectives and needs in relation to quality assurance in order to enable an effective engagement of both parties in the process.

Further, students must be engaged as equal reviewers in periodical self-assessment exercises/internal audits coordinated by quality assurance committees at institution or faculty level for regular, ongoing quality enhancement, and not necessarily in relation to an external quality assurance process.

## **3. Strategies for student engagement**

In the European Higher Education Area, student engagement is one of the main pillars for successful and effective performance of higher education institutions, in both governance and quality assurance structures. Due to the differences between institutions in Kosovo, the degree and efficiency of student engagement might vary. HEIs should make sure that they have a clear strategy and action plan to ensure students' understanding and

involvement in governance and QA, strengthened by providing sufficient support activities to students.

In this regard, relevant resources should be allocated to support student engagement.

#### **4. Design, approval, monitoring and review of study programmes**

In line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG, 2015), programmes are designed, reviewed and revised regularly with the involvement of students. This implies that students should be equal members of bodies responsible for overseeing, assessing and revising the existing study programmes.

In the case of a new programme establishment, students from similar programmes of the institution can be invited to participate, or students from the same programme delivered at other higher education institutions.

The ESG further underlines the engagement of other stakeholders in processes related to programme design, monitoring and review (such as academic and administrative staff, alumni, representatives of the labor market); whilst such engagement does not make the object of the present document, the active participation of other categories should not be overlooked by HEIs.

#### **5. Course development**

Students should have a direct involvement in course development through membership of different teams or working groups established for these purposes. This gives students an active role in shaping their learning journey, including in areas such as assessment, learning targets or teaching methods. This enforces the idea that students are part of the academic community and co-creators, which brings a very high level of trust for their ownership for their own learning journey, but also enables them to become confident autonomous lifelong learners, which is a necessity of contemporary education. In particular, students are seen as owners of their studies who know best what would supplement their studies; institutions may even consider offering students a small budget to develop their own courses and projects, to arrange speakers or to teach a topic by themselves if they are very good at it.

#### **6. Capturing the student voice in the development and implementation of quality assurance instruments and processes**

Institutions must continue to collect student feedback in relation to the whole range of institutional activities - this must not be restricted to the quality of their learning experience, but also the quality of infrastructure and facilities, administration, support services, extra-curricular activities, internships, etc. It is of key importance for institutions to act on student feedback in a timely manner by addressing the main concerns and ensuring that the resolve has been made visible to students.

Student feedback must be collected anonymously, but also analyzed and compared to the previous feedback cycles in the same course, which will then reveal if the same/similar issues are still a concern; recurring issues on courses should be targeted.

Quantitative feedback tools must be complemented with qualitative instruments, such as focus groups, student-staff consultative groups, which allow for in-depth discussion of student concerns and also increase the institutional response time.

In regards to the development of the tools themselves, students can be invited to contribute to:

- the drafting and revision of all surveys conducted by the institution; students can have a valuable input in suggesting survey content, a language that is easily understandable by students, format of questions, length of surveys, etc;
- the means of dissemination of institutional actions in response to student feedback; gaining student trust in the added value of providing feedback to institutional quality enhancement is of great importance, therefore the institution can consult student representatives on the best way to reach the student population with transparent dissemination of the actions the institution has taken in response to student feedback.

### **III. Guidelines for student engagement in external quality assurance**

#### **1. National level partner**

Relevant national institutions such as the Prime Minister Office, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the National Qualifications Authority, Kosovo Accreditation Agency should seek student engagement in all pieces of legislation regarding higher education. Furthermore, these stakeholders should support the amendment of any piece of legislation that would facilitate the integration of student members within the governance of higher education institutions and KAA, such as the Law on Higher Education, the Statute of HEIs, the relevant Administrative Instructions, among others.

It is of key importance for the Student Union of the Republic of Kosovo (USRK) to be restructured and reconsider its priorities in a way that enables the organization to meet the scope it was created for. USRK is invited to meaningfully reflect on the pillars of the student movement as included in the Student Union Development Handbook (European Students Union, 2009). There are multiple components related to student capacity building in the field of higher education generally and quality assurance specifically that need to be supported and coordinated by an autonomous student representative, instead of KAA or HEIs. This includes but is not limited to nominating students for KAA governance membership, driving student engagement in internal quality assurance, facilitating a more fit for purpose communication with the students, and representing a dialogue partner with national level institutions such as MEST for policy making purposes, among others.

#### **2. Kosovo Accreditation Agency level**

##### **a. Engagement in the structure of the agency**

Student representatives should be engaged as full members of all governance bodies of KAA - State Quality Council, Departments, Committees (including Appeals, Ethics, any other applicable) and relevant divisions.

In cases where KAA is facing legislative challenges in integrating students as full members (with voting powers), arrangements will be made for temporary observatory status of

student members. Under such transitory arrangements, engaging the student voice can be facilitated by supporting the constructive development of a culture where students can express their voice in formal meetings, regardless of their formal membership status.

Student membership should be extended in all internal, developmental and project teams established by the KAA, including self-evaluation teams, strategic planning, and projects teams submitted for external funding.

#### **b. Engagement in drafting external quality assurance provisions**

The student voice should be reflected in any policy making process coordinated by KAA, including the drafting of manuals, procedures, methodologies, as well as proposals initiated by the agency for the drafting and revision of relevant QA legislation such as Accreditation Laws, Administrative Instructions, among others.

Students could also be included in training and workshops for external QA reviewers as co-designers of the content and speakers; this will help ensure that a student perspective is embedded into the content of education delivered to peer reviewers.

#### **c. Student engagement in (re)accreditation expert teams**

In line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG, 2015), students should be engaged in all expert teams, without exception, for the (re)accreditation of all institutions and study programmes. In line with international best practice, within the expert teams, students should be treated as equal members, including equal rights and responsibilities, and equal pay as the rest of the team.

Also in alignment with the ESG, students part of the expert teams are carefully selected, have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task and are supported by appropriate training. In this regard, the accreditation agency may establish a pool of student experts, which it selects independently and ensures appropriate training for; however, once the pool has the capacity, it should be operated by the students themselves, with the KAA support for periodical renewal of membership and retraining.

While the principle of student engagement is equally reflected if the students engaged with accreditation exercises are locals or international, KAA can consider increasing its efforts for capacity building of Kosovar student representatives through engagement in different quality assurance exercises.

### **3. Strategies for student engagement**

National stakeholders such as MEST, KAA and National Qualifications Authority should develop strategies and action plans to ensure students' understanding and engagement in matters referring to policy making and governance in higher education nationally, strengthened by providing support activities to students. Capacity building resources should be allocated in this regard.

### **4. Developing a National Student Survey (NSS)**

A national student survey should be established in order to help higher education institutions improve their engagement with the student body, to add national visibility to student satisfaction in each institution, to add an objective and external data point that leads to improvement, to ensure a fully confidential (externally conducted) feedback collection that students trust without fear of repercussion, as well as to inform national policy.

Such a survey would have student learning at its heart, and would seek to measure the quality of the student experience in the HEIs and how students engage with their learning environments. In turn, this will also inform prospective students' choices, will provide data that supports institutions to improve the student experience, and will support public accountability.

## **5. Consistent engagement in external quality assurance processes**

The expert teams engaged with the (re)accreditation visits at institutional and programme level must have access to an independent and unfiltered reflection of the student voice at the institution under review, which can be supported by one or more of the the following mechanisms:

- KAA to secure access to the database of students enrolled at all institutions, from where the agency can extract for example 20 names of students that the expert team would like to meet during the (re)accreditation visit, of which the institution can choose 10;
- KAA to require the institution/programme under accreditation to publish or inform all students about the time, date and location of the meeting with the expert team, which anyone is able to attend freely;
- where student unions or other form of independent student representation is organized, these can be tasked with selecting the group of students that take part in the meeting with the expert team;
- the accreditation agency can conduct its own open survey amongst the students enrolled within the institution/programme, prior to any (re)accreditation process; the results of which are to be submitted to the expert team as preparatory materials.

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