Quality Assurance, Theoretical Implications, and Practical Implementation: Quality *versus* Standards in the Case of SEEU

By Zamir Dika, PhD., and Bistra Netkova, MA.

1. Introduction

The important debate on theoretical aspects of the concept of Quality Culture, in a broader sense, and Quality Assurance: definitions, relation and inter-relation within the Higher Education (HE) system, in the changing HE environment framed by the Principles of the Bologna Agreement and Strengthening the Network of Institutions and the Agencies or Bodies for Quality Assurance in international, national and institutional contexts have been popular on the international and national higher education agendas. Creation of certain Standards, Procedures and Guidelines by these mechanisms in order to achieve facilitated student and staff mobility and reasonable employability presented as good basis for Europe in achieving its aspiration to be the most dynamic and knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon Strategy). In order that European higher education has to demonstrate quality, this very intensive phase of the 'theoritization' of the Quality Assurance should now be followed with the same intensity and argumentation of the implementation as well as the debate on the practical aspects on how the Quality Culture should become part of the Institutional life. This paper intends to contribute to the rationale for the link between theoretical aspects of implementation in institutional contexts. It will discuss challenges and 'repercussions' during the design and implementation of Quality Assurance in South East European University in R. Macedonia. It will give a real life perspective of the Quality Assurance aspects in the attempt to create a QA institutional Environment in involving all stakeholders in the University (internal and external) through introducing the SEE University model of QA interpretation and implementation.

2. The rise for the need of quality assurance

After many years of individuality of education throughout Europe and wider, the practice of keeping the instrumentals educational recipes, whether good or bad, behind closed doors, finally came to an end. It was in 1998 with the movement pushed by the EU to create the Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System that catalyzed a move towards opening of those doors.[1]The Declaration states that:

> The international recognition and attractive potential of our systems are directly related to their external and internal readabilities. A system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparison and equivalence, seems to emerge.[2]

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 continued this progressive movement.[3] It promoted the idea of creating a system that will produce easily comparable degrees, both in the graduate and in the postgraduate cycle. This idea developed into the direction of promoting mobility, as a logical consequence, of the easily comparable degrees that materialized through the ECTS, as its programmatic tool:

> Establishment of a system of credits - such as the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognized by receiving Universities concerned.[4]

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[1] Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, Paris, the Sorbonne, May 25 1998, found on: www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne_**declaration**.pdf

[2] Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, Paris, the Sorbonne, May 25 1998, found on: www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne_**declaration**.pdf

[3] The Bologna Declaration (1999) "The European Higher Education Area" Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999.

[4] The Bologna Declaration (1999) "The European Higher Education Area" Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999

However, in order to achieve the aforementioned goals, more than a frame was needed. That is, a substantive base had to be designed that would provide a confirmation of the procedural progress. The creation of this substantive base became a major point of concern for the universities involved in the process of quality assurance. In this respect, the Dubrovnik Decision of 2002 of the European University Association '*started drawing up comparable criteria of quality in higher education.*'[5] This was culminated by the publishing of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area in 2005 by the European Association for Quality assurance in Higher Education Area[6] that implemented the guidelines from the Berlin Communiqué.

However, the issue of quality assurance, despite all the progress and development, remains a contentious one on two levels; the question of quality and the question of assuring that quality.

3. What is quality and how we can measure it?

Establishing certain criteria in the form of quality assurance, as a precondition to achieving mobility and reasonable employability of students, has put quality assurance into perspective. What is meant by quality in higher education? So far, a definition of quality assurance has not been adopted by the international community at large, leaving a gap in the theory of science of higher education. This created a situation where the problems with the definition started to evolve around the issue of defining quality *per se*.

In order to assure quality, one has to be able to measure it. But how can this be done? The concept of quality *vis-à-vis* higher education is problematic on two levels. Education in its essence means teaching, but also it means research. We chose these two important components of the higher educational machinery, in order to illustrate the questionability of measuring quality. Teaching is more or less an expression of the intellect and it is individually determined in the objective reality. This means that there are no two teachers in the world that will pass on the same lesson in the same way or that it is non sense to

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[5] Andrei Marga, *On the External Quality Assurance*, paper presented at a Salzburg Conference organized by European Association for Education Law and policy, 21-22 April 2006.
[6] European Association for Quality assurance in Higher Education Area, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Helsinki, Finland 2005.

claim that the same teacher will teach the same lesson in the same way in the next 10 years. Teaching seeks creativity and knowledge of the mind. Reasonably it could be said that it amounts to art. Consequently, how one measures the quality of art? One can observe it and comment on it, but to judge it would prove to be problematic. However, even though teaching has elements of art, it also has the element of pragmatism, *i.e.* keeping essential the passing on of the knowledge. To that end, the question is could it be evaluated by peers or students?

The same would apply to research. Extensive amount of imagination of ones intellect pronounces subjective force, of which, at the end is judged by 'objective peers'. However, the exact level of its quality is always subjected to subjectivism by the peers who are 'judging'. However, what is reasonably possible is the common understanding whether the relevant teaching fulfils certain minimum common understanding of what is effective and sufficient, and that certain research satisfies certain minimum common values of standing.

Second point would be the fact that quality as a term is highly elusive and conditioned by time, geography, and the level of economical development, i.e. what is regarded as quality in for example Germany does not necessary carry the same weight as for example in the Republic of Macedonia. Furthermore, what is quality today might not be tomorrow, due to the positive and negative dynamics of societies. And quality ensuring quality depends also on the multiculturalism in a given environment.

Therefore, what is needed in order to bring different universities and the higher education closer, achieving mobility, and competitiveness, in the labour market are certain parameters. These could be said to be standards that we seek to achieve; but also the quality to achieve quality through those standards? In this respect, in the foreword of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area the standards stress quality assurance:[7]

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[7] European Association for Quality assurance in Higher Education Area, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Helsinki, Finland 2005.

'In the Berlin communique of 19 September 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIBÕ, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Bologna Follow-Up Group to Ministers in 2005. The Ministers also asked ENQA to take due account of the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks.'

4. Standard first quality second

The Bologna Declaration sets two goals that Universities have to achieve, namely, the comparability of higher education and increasing the competitiveness of European Universities.[8]The first suggests harmonization of higher education programs on a comparable level under the same or similar standards, or in other words with same or similar quality. Hence quality cannot be measured, that leaves us with the question of creation parameters that will create standards in higher education. Furthermore, since quality as a category has an amplitude character, this implies that quality is changeable and can be high or low, but where that high or low could be found and in relation to what parameters is difficult to pin point. On other hand, standards as a category symbolize stableness and certainty. Also, standards can be upgraded through time to best suit the conditions of the market and of research developments in the area of the higher education.

This leads us to the second question, which is how do we assure quality. Actually, standards can be assured and quality could be reached by assuring that standards are implemented. Put in other words, this would mean that in order to assure quality, certain standards have to be met. In this regard, one could understand that the creation of common standards in the Higher Education as a threshold, or as a gradation as where the standard ends and the quality begins.

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[8] The Bologna Declaration (1999) "The European Higher Education Area" Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999.

Quality assurance in its most simplistic form could be said to present a process that that seeks to surpass the already reached standards into the higher education. Therefore even though is unrealistic to ask for all to reach a similar or certain level of quality, simply because it is not possible to determine the quality, it is very realistic to ask that all universities fulfil certain common standards in the Higher Education. This would leave the freedom of further development of quality to the discretion of each University[9] and thus recognizing that the progress is in the differences, which on other hand create competitiveness. This depletion of the concept of quality assurance into achieving standards as a threshold and freedom to reach greater quality will side see the sceptics of the quality assurance process and will avoid the problem of, as professor Jugen Mittelstrass, stresses[10] that by implementing quality assurance instruments we run the risk of creating mediocrity.

5. Creating standards that will ensure quality; the case of the SEEU

In order to be precise, despite of all the academic dilemmas in practice it is paramount to somehow reach a definition or at least a 'manual' for quality assurance. The Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Macedonia does not offer a definition of quality assurance, but introduces external and internal systems for quality assurance.[11] Those systems ought to enable quality assurance through the standards enshrined in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. This may be sought as three pillars. The first pillar would mean the creation and implementation of external standards (accreditation[12] and re-accreditation as a possibility),[13] internal standards (curriculum requirement, academic autonomy,

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[10] Jurgen Mittelstrass, *Quality Assurance within Higher Education Institutions*, paper presented at a Salzburg Conference organized by European Association for Education Law and policy, 21-22 April 2006.

[11] Structure of Education System in R. Macedonia, www.euro**education**.net/prof/macenco.htm.

[12] Actually it could be said that the accreditation process of the Higher Educational institutions is being created and directed at measuring whether a certain institution fulfills a certain standard that is needed for receiving that accreditation. The premise that *an accreditation regime takes care of all aspects of quality assurance* today could be looked upon with great skepticism. See Jon Haakstad, *Accreditation and Quality Assurance; Accreditation as Quality Assurance-A skeptical view,* paper presented at a Salzburg Conference organized by European Association for Education Law and policy, 21-22 April 2006.

[13] 'Considering the individual responsibility of the institutions of higher education on the one hand, and the responsibility of the overall national quality assurance systems on the other hand, the Berlin Declaration of September 2003 lists both evaluation and accreditation as important tools for quality assurance. It has been

accessibility to citizens with certain abilities, levels of academic staff requirements, research requirements, student evaluation processes, and student employability monitoring), and finally external system of control (external evaluation international/national). However, in the university arena in the Republic of Macedonia, the first pillar of accreditation has been predominant whereas the internal systems of quality control have been legging behind, if existent at all.

Despite the reality, the SEEU has developed its own Strategy and Rules and Procedures for Quality Assurance based on the above mentioned Standards, taking the idea that the battle for quality has to start within the institution itself; and taking into account the academic subjectivism in terms of creativity and the multi cultural dimension of the University settings.

The Rector of the University is leading the process of Quality Assurance at South East European University and is responsible to the Board of the University. In the name of the Rector, the Vice-Rector for Academic Issues is appointed to implement the Quality Assurance strategies, to manage with the instrumentarium of Quality Assurance, to prepare the Reports in the format suitable for decision-making process in the University Council, University Senate and the Board of the University where the main strategies for the University is being created. Actually the University Board on May 2004 has adopted the Strategic Plan for the University (2004 – 2008)[14] wherein the part on 'Quality Issues' was planned that a senior member of staff will be working part-time on continuous quality improvement: what the EUA defines as a 'Quality Champion' assisted by a University level Quality Assurance Commission, and Faculty Commissions including stakeholder representatives.

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agreed "that by 2005, national quality assurance systems should include …- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results, - A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures (…)".Referring to that valuation can be described as dealing with programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results. Evaluation is aiming at optimizing quality. It is ensuring the quality referring to aims and goals which are normally defined by the unit being valuated. Evaluation typically means a process which is totally, or at least partly, self-referential. Therefore valuation is primarily a means by which an institution is steering itself in the process of self governance. Evaluation may also serve the accountability.' See Hans-Uwe Erichsen, Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Key note speech at First Athens international Conference on University Assessment "Demonstrating Quality in Higher Education" 27-28 May 2005, and Athens, Greece.

[14] 'Strategic Plan for the University 2004 - 2008' adopted by the Board of the South East European University on May 26 2004.

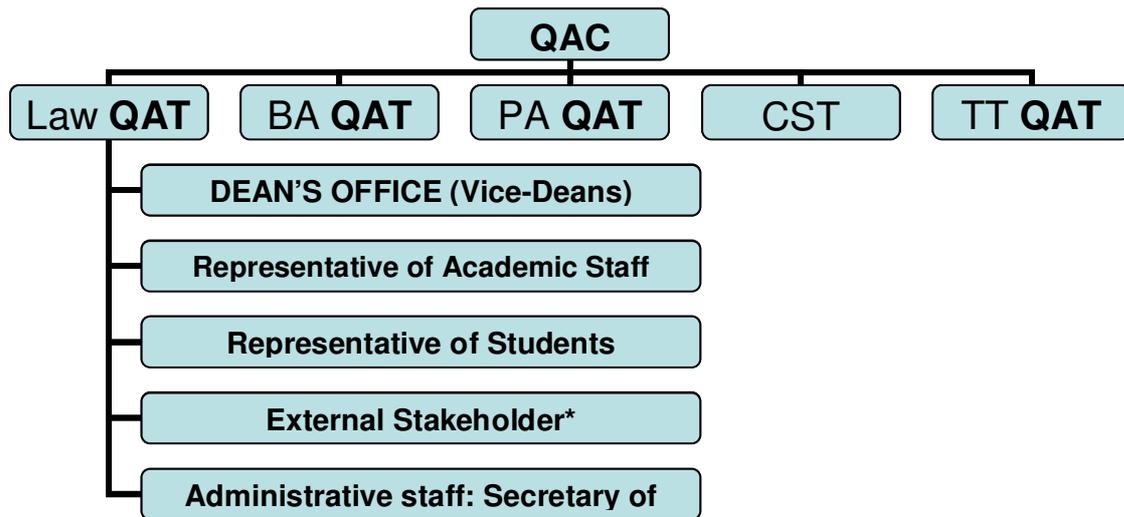This was the basis in creating The Rules and Procedures for Quality Assurance[15] at SEE University, read:

'It is the intention of SEEU to comply with best European practice in quality assessment, evaluation, and accountability. The University will co-operate fully with the Licensing Board and Evaluation Agency established under the Law on Higher Education of the Republic of Macedonia.'

The scheme of the instrumentarium for the Quality Assurance at the SEE University defined in the Rules and Procedures for the Quality Assurance is presented in the figure 1.

Following, the University has established a Quality Assurance Commission (QAC), headed by the 'Quality Champion' (QC) an external expert elected by the University Board - Heads of all Departments within the University and the Secretary General. The office of the Secretary General provides the technical support for the work of the University QAC. The University QAC meets at least two times during each semester.

As part of the decentralization of the quality assurance each Faculty at the University has established Quality Assurance Teams (QAT), consisting of five entities. The QAT are lead by the Dean of the Faculty with membership consisting two Vice-Deans (Vice-Dean for Academic Issues and Vice-Dean for Student Issues), a representatives of the Academic Staff, Student representative, a representative of the external stakeholder from the field (for example in the Faculty of Law the external shareholder is the President of the basic Court of Tetovo) and the representative of the administration – the Secretary of the Faculty. The student representative and the external stakeholder are elected by the Council of the Faculty with a mandate of one year with the possibility for one reappointment. The Faculty QAT has the responsibility for implementing the Institutional Quality Development Plans produced by the University QAC, ensures 'open' debate within the Department including all the community members in it to participate actively in its work.

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[15] Rules and Procedures for Quality Assurance, SEEU, published

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QAC – Quality Assurance Commission headed by the '**Quality Champion**'

QAT – Quality Assurance Teams for each Faculty; QAC for discussion and approval.

* - An expert/professional from the industry – labor market, and/or government.

Figure 1. Scheme for the Quality Assurance at the SEE University.

The University QAC produces Institutional Development plans for Evaluation, which is submitted to the national Evaluation Agency. These plans need not be approved by the Agency, since the University is responsible for its own actions and decisions as part of its autonomy.

The plans cover the main areas for which the Agency lays down criteria. They allow for an institutionally-led self-evaluation by departments and faculty that provides the basis for external moderation by peer groups from outside the University itself.

The SEE University has created the evaluation modes described via Rules and Procedures for the Quality Assurance with the attempt to frame the context of the qualitative aspects in order the existing instrumentarium for the Quality Assurance to have the substance. The SEE University evaluation modes are consisting from the involvement of individual academics in encouraging them as much as possible in the development of evaluative modes and in operating the system; emphasis is placed on enhancing professional strength in the face of the need to meet the country's economic and social objectives;

evaluation is based on criteria on which assessors can make judgments. As regards research, criteria are both of scientific competence and of social and economic relevance.

As regards teaching, evaluation is conducted as to improve the quality and the quantity that the system produces. The criteria for good teaching are looked into, as regards physical circumstances, updating of curriculum, research and scholarship. Evaluation criteria for teaching takes into account innovation in teaching methods and the effective use of modern technology to cope with increasing participation and restricted funding.

5a.   SEE University Quality Assurance Annual Action Plan: IDENTIFICATION
Identification of the main issues to be discussed and improved being in the 'domain' of the Quality Assurance in the University level is being done by the adopted 'Annual Action Plan' produced as an output from the Quality Assurance instrumentarium, presented by the Quality Assurance Commission, adopted by the Senate of the University. The interesting debate on the phase of adaptation of the document was on making distinction between the 'Quality Assurance' issues and those related to the 'normal-daily' academic life.

This debate produced the Quality Assurance Annual Action Plan[16] where the main perception of the Quality Assurance, principal points, means to be used and instruments to realize and 'measure' are being prescribed in the Plan:

> *SEE University 'Model' for the Quality Assurance Perception*
> Quality Assurance management and certification aims to better satisfy the students while motivating the employees. The basic idea is quite simple: the university is a community of people working for the same pedagogical aim which is to give to the students the best training and the most appropriate knowledge.
> That means also:
> 1. To modernize constantly the university services and administration in order to improve the student's public utility and by the way to improve the teaching practices in the SEE-University.

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[16] 'SEE University Quality Assurance Annual Action Plan' for the academic year 2005/2006

2. To mobilize and motivate the SEE-University employees and to better answer their professional expectations which is a part of the internal management policy.

Principal points that are to be considered:

- <u>On the administrative level</u>: the university as institution carries out its activities and management in specific ways which embody its mission and goals. The inevitable discrepancy between what ought to be (norms and values) and what really is (specific organization and activities) indicates the institution's strengths and weaknesses. So far, the analysis should focus on a detailed description and analysis of quality management at all institutional levels.

- <u>On the teaching level</u>: to describe for each faculty in an evaluative and synthetic way the study programs, the research developments, and the educational approaches, etc. This should be description with reference (cf. collected syllabuses) that can reflect the institution's academic profile. It's important also to evaluate how these programs and organizational units reflect the mission and goals of the SEE-University.

Means to be used

In addition to proposals made above, questionnaires to the users should be first designed in order to put in adequacy SEE-University general expectations and the SEE-University means. All that means:

- At first: to identify the requests and the institution's view of quality management and strategic planning. It should result in a report which is named as a "self-evaluation" process.
- At second: to give a general analysis of all working procedures. It should not be simply descriptive but evaluative and synthetic as well.

Issues and instruments

The main expectation is to start[17] with conducting self evaluation about the quality of the University. It will first consist of a survey about each faculty management and administration. To conduct this survey as best as possible it is suggested to provide indicators that should be discussed into the Quality Assurance Teams of the Departments (Faculties).

Four issues and instruments are identified as**:**

1. **Student population analysis**: age, sex, parents' cultural and professional backgrounds, region, ethnicity, exam entrance results. Students' grading: students results by semesters since the beginning of SEEU establishment.

2. **Faculties' management and organisation**: statistics about non academic and academic employers, hierarchical policy in every faculty, employers' continuous training policy, the rate teacher/student and non academic/student by faculty, etc.

3. **Faculties' training offers**: number of required classes, number of electives. Evaluation processes that are used in every faculty; syllabuses requirement for each teacher in the faculties. What is the faculty procedure to establish syllabuses? Are syllabuses and study programs harmonized with international universities programs?

4. **Communication strategies** of the faculties: how to get information in the faculty? What are strategies for faculty website and for a faculty book? What's about job information and investigation for next graduate students?

Challenges during the IDENTIFICATION phase:

In the 'short' experience of this SEE University organs that are consisting the Quality Assurance instrumentarium, some of the uncertainties and dilemmas are identified during this phase of identification of the main issues dealing with the quality in the institutional context:

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[17] As it is described and recommended in Professor Rolf Dubs (The Head of the SEE University Board) University Management seminar, SEE University, 2004.

- Distinction between 'Quality Issues' and normal-daily academic life. Which are issues that will be treated by the Quality Assurance Instrumentarium and which will be treated by other University/Faculty organs as are University Council, Faculty Council, Academic/research staff activities, etc.;

- Quantity of the quality issues: 'how much' of the issues can be targeted in the annual plan to be improved by the process of the Quality Assurance in order to be achieved the performances of the quality vis-à-vis the Quality Assurance resources and capacities. There is the risk of 'overdosing' or 'underestimation' in the phase of identification. Who will measure it? The 'metrics' should be established – standards;

- The form and format of the targeted issues – the approach: when the Plan is being prepared, there is a risk of being to much descriptive or philosophical, or in contrarian being too practical and pragmatic. The 'ratio' between the theorytization of the quality issues and keeping it practical should be established in order to be understandable, implementable, and measurable.

5.b   THE REACTION – 'Decentralization' of the Quality Assurance in the Departmental level: Quality Assurance Teams

The Quality Assurance Teams of all Departments have discussed the main four issues identified for improvement by the Quality Assurance Annual Action Plan. The discussions in the form of the Minutes was distributed to all members of the Quality Assurance Team, and after the reaction, the Head of the Team has produced a Final report which was sent to the 'Quality Champion' in order to be discussed in the University Quality Assurance Commission.

The Quality Assurance Commission has produced 'a reaction' for the appointed issues. In following there is a small part of the report produced for the first issue identified by the Annual Plan:

Student population analysis:

At the present time in all faculties they are no up-dated statistics and data that can be used properly. SEEU faculties didn't proceed yet to get statistics overview about number and distribution of students, cultural background of the students as well as distribution by sexes and ethnicity. They are not enough data about students' examination entrance nor any statistics about students' graduation through the 3 years of SEEU existence. As for example it was pointed out by the Teacher Training faculty Dean that in the faculty about 80% of the first year students succeeds and went into the second year of study while only 65% of the second year of study succeed and went into the third year of study. Can we find the same distribution in every faculty and how can we analyze this student's reality?

However every participant agreed that a systematic collection of such data is necessary and needed to get an impartial view of where SEEU Faculties are at the present.

5.b1 The role of the stakeholders in the Quality Assurance Teams – Departmental level

In the creation and the implementation phase of the University Quality Assurance Annual Action Plan every member – stakeholder of the Quality Assurance Team in the department/faculty had a very useful and valuable input depending on the brought concept from the 'interest' group from where delegated or represented.

- The 'managerial' part-perspective represented by the Deans' office: The Dean of the faculty as a leader of the Quality Assurance Team is responsible for the process in this 'departmental/faculty' level. Set's up the agenda in the correlation with the Annual Plan identifying the specifics of the faculty in this context, manage with the meeting in order to keep the focus on the quality issues during the participation of the other stakeholders and canalizes the debates in drawing the conclusions for the 'post-production' and 'follow-up' phase;

- The 'academia' input by the representatives of the academic staff (professors) and assistant representative are assuring that the quality issues will

remain in the dimension of the academia as a main factor that produces and transfer the knowledge, skills, competencies, etc. Teaching as a process is an object of the permanent development and as such remains as a main topic that is being addressed for improvement – means treated as a quality issue. Taking into the consideration the complexity and sensitivity of teaching process, the input of the 'academics' remains as a crucial in the quality assurance. The way that other stakeholders during all the process of the quality assurance are making the argumentation to have their input, their perspectives, in order to help improving quality in teaching is of a very importance for doing changes or introducing the ground for improvement in the teaching process;

- Even the role of the students in the curriculum design, in the evaluation of the academic aspects of the Syllabus and the competencies of the teachers is limited, the importance of the view of the representative of the students in the Quality Assurance Teams in the faculty is very valuable if concentrated in the field of the possibility to make comparison of performances between teachers, aspects of teaching methods and techniques, level of interactivity and challenge, responsibility and punctuality of the teachers. The role of the student representative in the process of assuring the quality has strengthened with the 'student evaluation' mechanism which is being implemented from the establishment of the university. Forms of evaluation by students of instructors constitute an important part of the evaluation process. Reliable forms have been developed, distributed, and processed by the University on a semester to semester, course to course basis.

Here is represented a part of the student evaluation form (the questions only):

Instructions:
Answer all questions honestly.
All of your answers are anonymous and will be treated as strictly confidential.
If you do not want to answer a particular question, please select 'No Answer' for that question.
More information about evaluations

Course

The level of difficulty of this course was:
1)

The amount of material covered in this course was:
2)

In terms of its quality and relevance to the subject, the material that was made available to me in this course was:
3)

Did the course meet for the time allotted?
4)

Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as:
5)

Would you like to have this course in English?
6)

Professor

The instructor's ability to explain the material clearly was:
7)

The instructor's ability to create an open atmosphere in the classroom where students were encouraged to express their opinion and ask questions was:
8)

The instructor's use of a broad array of teaching methods and techniques was:
9)

Was the professor on time on a class?
10)

Did the professor frequently miss classes?
11)

Did the professor change the schedule and/or merge groups?
12)

Overall, I would rate the quality of the instructor's teaching as:
13)

Student

My attendance in this course was:
14)

The amount of work that I did for this course each week outside of the classroom was:
15)

The grade that I expect to receive in this course is:
16)

My current GPA is:
17)

- The role and contribution of the external stakeholders (from the industry – labor market, and/or government) has shown as a very productive and important especially if focused in the introducing the concept of Learning Outcomes in teaching and learning as a very important part of the Quality Assurance. Since during the description of the Learning Outcomes, the Curriculum Outcomes should define the profile of the student after the completion of the studies in terms of: competences and skills; knowledge and understanding; attitudes and concepts; in building well educated people useful for the society, the correlation with external key stakeholders becomes a very important prerequisite for efficient and sustainable LO.

The external key stakeholders in the Learning Outcomes process should be involved in two dimensions:

a. as a direct participants in the Quality Assurance infrastructure for the description of the Learning Outcomes and

b. as a part of the instrument for measuring the achievement of the Learning Outcomes;

a. The contribution of the members from the external key stakeholders in the Quality Assurance Teams in the departments/faculty can be of a great importance when the Learning Outcomes of the Curriculum are being defined.

Even that the sensibility of the process of describing the Curriculum Outcomes in the first look could raise the academic 'skepticism' for the results of the involvement of the external stakeholders in this very delicate academic activity, the experience after the debate within Quality Assurance Teams has shown that the participation of the external stakeholders is in fact are broadening the perspective and giving qualitative input on the final product.

b. The measurement of the achievement of the described Learning Outcomes is remaining one of the biggest challenges. The complexity in building the proper instruments for measuring the Learning Outcomes is contained in the multi-

dimensionality of the process: the academics are involved with the definition of Learning Outcomes in the syllabuses of the courses and/or modules; academics and managerial staff (dean's/rector's office) in defining the study programs (curriculum) Learning Outcomes; involvement of students in this process through the student evaluation procedures; the Quality Assurance instrumentarium input in creating the evolutionary and dynamic LO process; and alumni as a nearest link of academia with real-world implementation of the LO. But, the real measurement of the level of the achievement of the Learning Outcomes should come from the external key stakeholders presumably. The quality and quantity of the involvement of the graduates in the society/market can bring a very important tangible argument on measuring the Learning Outcomes.

The involvement of the external key stakeholders as a very important part of measuring the level of the achievements of Learning Outcomes can be done by the communication of the Carrier Centers and Alumni Association in the direct contact with them through questionnaire designed for the graduates and for the external stakeholders, through live interviews with both parties and continuous presence of external stakeholders in the institutions via Fair's, open community type of the projects, etc.

- The secretary of the department/faculty will co-ordinate the organization and follow-up of the Team and also since the importance of the administration, administrative logistic and infrastructure in the process of the quality are becoming more and more as a factor for the quality strategies in improving and motivating the administrative resources and capacities of the University as an important element of the success.

Challenges during the REACTION phase:
The short experience of the Quality Assurance Teams in the Departmental level in this phase of the decentralization and de-concentration of the activities in the SEE University

for designing and implementing the strategies to improve the quality analyzing each stakeholder as a part of the Team has shown the following challenges:

- The Quality Culture should be formed in order to retain the focus on the issues dealing with the quality in order the Teams' report to be inclusive and complementary with the competencies and activities of other Faculty and University organs;

- The balance between the request for 'maximum' quality and the real resources and capacities of the Department/faculty;

- The balanced interaction between academia and external key stakeholders should be one of the main stone-pillars in building efficient and sustainable process for describing and measuring the quality and Learning Outcomes.

- Raising the awareness of the academics and students for active participation in the quality assurance;

5c. creating IT environment for Quality Assurance change

The importance of the IT environment for the Quality Assurance can be expressed in to distinctive fields:

- In the need for having profound data from the profile of the students, data about prior education and other bio and socio data, the success rate of the student, grading and the retention rate in the course and curriculum level that can be of a prerequisite for qualitative analysis in designing the Quality Assurance strategies and keeping pace on it. SEE University has reacted upon the outcomes from the Quality Assurance recommendation and formed the Institutional Research Office (IRO). IRO is shaping all the abovementioned data in the forms of the reports that will help on decision making processes into the Departments/faculty and the University in designing the strategies for improving the quality and also developed an IT all student services – both Intra and InterNet based called (e-services)[18];

- And also in the possibilities for increasing the interactivity and the capacities of the interlink between lecturer-course-learner (student) via Course Management Software and other software tools for on-line, distance education. SEE University has implemented the

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[18] http://eservice.seeu.edu.mk - Copyright © 2006 SEE University

web based learning management system called 'Angel'[19]. This was also a reaction and investment from the University in bettering the performances of the interactivity and communication between Institution and students.

6. Conclusion

Even the term 'quality' joint with 'assurance' is still being discussed in the 'academia' followed by the different perceptions and dilemmas in the descriptive, conceptual or contextual aspects, in general, in the Institutional level the culture of quality is already becoming as a part of academic life. Institutions through their models are creating the pool of 'best practices' for the Quality Assurance and sometimes are advanced with the global concepts for defining the quality and means how to measure it. The main challenges are:

- the 'battle' for creating the awareness among the stakeholders taking part in the process of the Quality Assurance because the Quality, even undefined, is obviously by itself is becoming the mark for the success in the trends of globalization for the institutions of Higher Education; and

- the measurement of the quality in inventing proper, reliable instruments and in the other hand creating standards to keep the track on the process and making it transferable and transparent.

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[19] http://angellearning.com - Copyright © 2006 ANGEL Learning