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### Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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**Short bio (150 words max):**

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Hermina Pika Radmilovič is the Head of Centre for Quality development at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. She is responsible for the quality processes on the institutional level and developing the Centre for teaching and learning. She has her MA in Interpersonal and Organisational Communication from University of Little Rock in Arkansas, USA and specialised in intercultural experience of students. She also worked as the Head of international relations and was the manager of the university sport centre. Taking over the area of quality culture, she was also involved as an expert in institutional evaluations through the EUA IEP and in other accreditation processes of national quality agencies.

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Rok Hrzič attends the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Maribor in Maribor, Slovenia. Since entering the university, he has been an active student representative, having served on various faculty and student bodies, including the University of Maribor Senate and the Board of Directors. Currently, he holds the office of the Vice-rector for student affairs and is intimately involved in creating an institutional environment that encourages students' participation at all levels. He is also the cofounder and director of



the EDUS foundation, a foundation for the opportunity of youth, which aims to tackle the rising graduate unemployment on the local level.

**After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.**

## Proposal

### **Title: Raising awareness of the quality teaching with students' involvement**

**Abstract (150 words max):** In accordance with the HE Act, the University of Maribor has among the governing bodies also the Students' Council that is led by the student who is a Vice-rector and has an important role, especially in the university development of quality system. This means that the students have possibilities to influence decisions at the highest level within the University. The central role of students is crucial also in the assessment and quality of teaching. The University is currently developing professional development activities in teaching and learning as well as the training programs for other staff. The system did not exist for the institution as a whole. With the strong partnership of students, a series of activities are developed that help raising awareness of the quality teaching among the academic community at the University.

The presentation will introduce the system of students' role in this process with various examples.

### **Text of paper (3000 words max):**

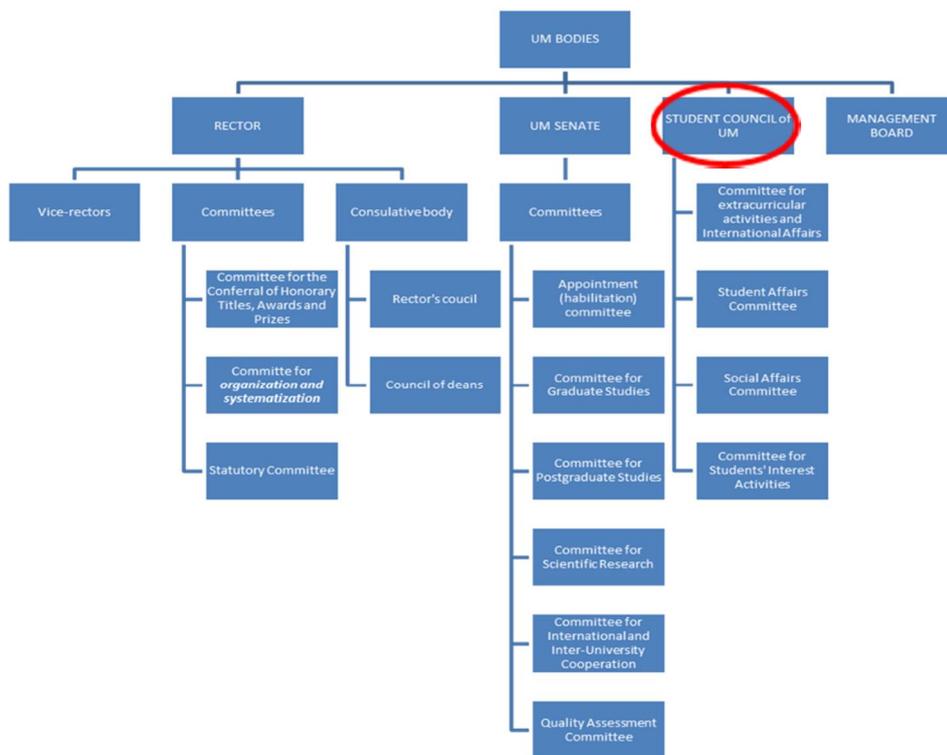
The University of Maribor<sup>1</sup> is the second biggest university in Slovenia with 18 000 students and 1700 staff who strive to make students' learning experience a positive one. It has seventeen faculties, which offer undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes in humanities, social studies, technical studies, economy, medicine, law, natural sciences, educational studies and arts. The University of Maribor is a regional developer and since the faculties are located not only in the city of Maribor, but also in other parts of Slovenia.

In September 2011, the Centre for quality development<sup>2</sup> was established to support and manage the activities focused on development of the quality culture. Soon after developing the implementation plan for quality assurance, several activities took place. The institutional evaluation program was performed by EUA and institutional accreditation by the national agency for quality. These activities initiated crucial processes like adopting the strategic development plan of the university until 2020 and the implementation plan. One of the areas that has proven to need most attention in the near future was the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, the University of Maribor is currently developing professional development activities in teaching and learning as well as the training programs for researchers, management and administrative staff. The system did not exist for the institution as a whole. However, the academic staff did not respond as actively as did the student representatives at the events organized to raise the awareness and share the experiences of good practice in the area of teaching and learning. In this respect, with the strong partnership of students the Centre for quality is developing a series of activities that help raising awareness of the quality teaching among the academic community at the University.

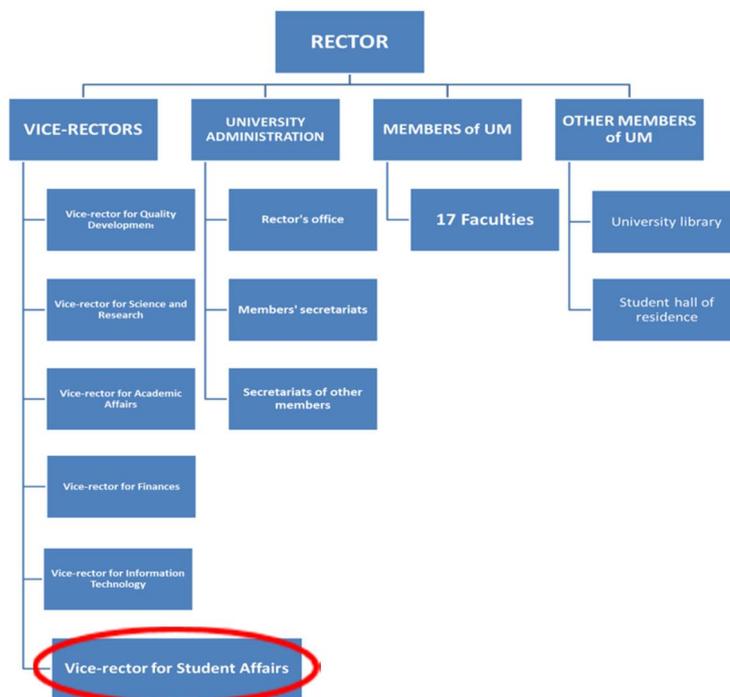
<sup>1</sup> For further information see <http://www.um.si/en/about/About/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> For further information see <http://www.um.si/en/quality/quality-on-UM/Pages/default.aspx>

In accordance with the Higher Education Act, the University has the following governing bodies: Rector, Senate, Management Board and Student Council (picture 1). The Students' Council at the University of Maribor is led by a student who holds the Vice-rector's position for Student affairs and has an important role, especially in the university development of quality system (picture 2). The students are also represented by student councils of faculties led by the student who holds the position of the Vice-dean for student affairs at the faculty level. In addition to its role laid down by the law, Statute and other internal acts, the Councils is in charge of a wide range of extracurricular activities complementing the study offer with cultural, social, sports, educational and entertainment projects aimed at heightening the sense of belonging and providing a comprehensive educational experience. This means that the students are represented fully and have possibilities to influence decisions at the highest level within the University.



Picture 1 - University of Maribor governing structure (<http://www.um.si/en/about/About/Pages/Managment.aspx>)



Picture 2 - University of Maribor management structure  
(<http://www.um.si/en/about/About/Documents/Organizational%20Chart%20UM.pdf>)

The student Vice-rector is invited to the regular meetings of the rector's team, has the same rights and voting opportunities as other Vice-rectors who are professors. This is the tradition at the University of Maribor ever since its establishment and not every rector is comfortable with this arrangement at the beginning of his term, but soon realises the advantages of student involvement on this high level of decision making. However, this often raises eyebrows of visitors that are not familiar with the institution and are criticized for putting students in a position where they need to wear two hats - the hat of a student representative and the hat of a faculty or university leadership at the same time. Theoretically, this can be perceived, and is often seen by outsiders, as a conflict of interest and in practice results in placing a double burden on the representative in question. Yet the students argue that there are more benefits than drawbacks of their position, although at first sight this may not be so evident.

An important premise of the above critique is that the interests of students and leadership are in conflict. While admittedly such situations do exist, they are very rare. Looking at common demands that students often make, such as better teaching methods and staff, more or better support services, and more transparency in various systems, these usually lead to some changes and consequently to a better working environment and positive outcomes for an institution as a whole. If, however, a significant and real conflict does arise, a student representative that understands and can empathize with both the perspective of a leadership and that of a student body is in a much better position to find a mutually acceptable and satisfying compromise.

Yet such inclusion does not come without challenges and it takes continuous effort to shape the university structures for effective leverage of the benefits of student involvement. It is easier to understand these challenges and benefits on two separate levels: a student level and a student representative level.

The processes of quality assurance do not weigh too



heavily in everyday experience of students, so it is quite natural that on average they lack a comprehensive understanding of quality structures within the institution. This becomes an issue when a lack of knowledge leads to a lack of motivation to participate in these structures. A clear case in point here is the annual student survey of teaching, which brings in some cases to the unrealistic, often random answers that apathetic students submit. The issue is made worse by the fact that this tool is a crucial part of the institutions' system of awarding academic titles. A challenge of a different, thankfully smaller magnitude is that there is a lack of culture of informal feedback between students and teachers or support services. Students often feel that such feedback is inappropriate and some fear that it is going to result in negative consequences. Despite the fact that this is an extremely rare case, the lack of feedback still presents a significant challenge for holistic and active student participation in quality assurance at the university.

On the other hand, many of the challenges outlined above persist also with the student representatives. While they are usually highly motivated to improve the students' experience, they often lack the understanding of university structures, including the quality assurance system, to leverage their statutory competencies in a truly effective manner. Thus, they often use informal paths and initiatives to achieve their goals, which are often ineffective and, perhaps more importantly, do not result in institutional learning in a systematic way. Such initiatives are often partially successful and serve as an important and rich source of innovation for the institution in various areas of development, most often in teaching and learning. A very important example to note here is the system of peer-assisted learning that has been in most cases suggested and introduced by students representatives and is still often managed and run by students with only minor participation from teaching staff. Additionally the Student Council has recently developed an intensive training program for new student representatives, which has proven to be effective especially by encouraging a more active role of students participating in university governing bodies meetings.

A final yet important benefit of student involvement is the often-overlooked role of universities: teaching students to lead. Any system that places student representatives in a position to work closely with faculty and university leadership is perceived to be a very important learning experience for those students. It allows them to experience first-hand how managing complex adaptive organizations looks like, how to solve problems that inevitably arise, how to make difficult decisions, how to motivate team members for best efficiency and to gain insight into many other processes and skills of leadership. Therefore, it is important to maintain the role of student representatives in managerial position and it should be perceived as a strength of the University of Maribor.

As mentioned above, the central role of students is crucial also in the assessment and quality of teaching. The students evaluate teachers every academic year for every subject they teach. The student survey on the performance of teachers is offered on-line, it is anonymous and they can fill it out before or after the exam. The participation at the evaluation is obligatory, however they have the option not to answer a certain question or give an opinion about it. The students cannot enrol in the next semester if they don't participate at the teacher's evaluation. The results of the teacher's evaluation are discussed at the departmental level, at the quality commission of the faculty, study commission and faculty student council. The dean together with the student representative has to perform a personal meeting with 10% of the best and worst evaluated teaching staff. Together they decide on the implementation plan for the next academic year. The best practices are shared with others; those with weaknesses in teaching are offered support.



The quality of education, scientific research and artistic work is assured through the appointment-promotion system, which systematically monitors educational activities, scientific research and artistic work conducted by teachers and researchers. The appointment system is based on the criteria for the appointment of faculty ranks, COBISS (Cooperative Online Bibliographic System & Services), which contains bibliographies of university teachers and researchers, SICRIS (Slovenian Current Research Information System), student surveys and the University's appointment committees. The process of teacher's evaluation is an important part of the teachers' promotion criteria. The promotion criteria include also students' evaluation results and Faculty student council's opinion. If the students' evaluation results and Faculty student council's opinion are negative, the teacher cannot be promoted. The students' opinion is taken very seriously at the Appointment committee and Senate meetings, therefore it is very important that the area of quality teaching is further developed and enhanced.

According to the Higher education Act<sup>3</sup> and the Statute of the University of Maribor<sup>4</sup> the students have 20% of the representatives in each governing body or committee of the university. In the elections for the dean or rector, the students have at least 1/5 of their representatives from the total number of academics. Students are elected to vote for one academic year. The student representatives as deans and members of committees are elected for two years.

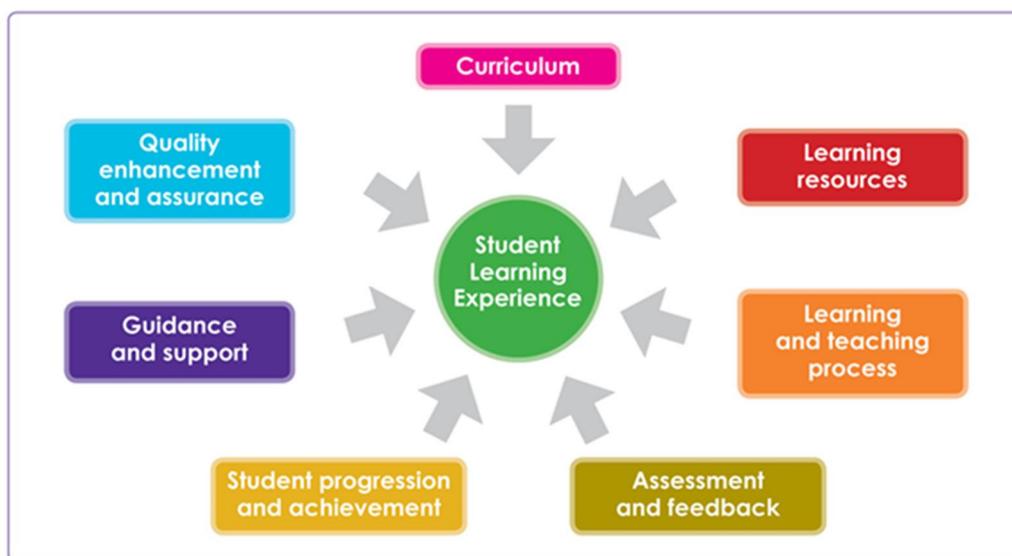
Students' representatives are presently very active and participate in every process of evaluation activities. Therefore it is very important that they have the knowledge and skills to make positive changes and influence the development of quality in all areas of university functioning. The Centre for quality development at University of Maribor has started several training programs to build effective student engagement. Using the experiences and the training model developed by SPARQS<sup>5</sup>, the students' representatives from each faculty, the members of quality committee and student representatives from each study programme are regularly trained to learn about quality processes and important elements of their learning experiences. SPARQS means student participation in quality Scotland and is the national agency whose role is to support students to use quality systems to help make a positive and rewarding difference to the learning experience. They have developed a Student Learning Experience concept to help understand the different parts that make up students' learning experience (picture 3). This has proven to be a very useful and practical tool that students describe as a real "eye opener".

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<sup>3</sup> For further information see <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO172>

<sup>4</sup> For further information see <http://www.um.si/en/about/um-statute/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> For further information see <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/>



Picture 3 – The student learning experience by SPARQS (<http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/>)

The University of Maribor has come quite a way to effectively incorporate students in the processes of quality assurance. With the main challenge remaining the lack of knowledge of the quality system, the priority has become to offer students and student representatives a good permanent support system that aims to educate, assist and inspire. With two years of pilot projects of training student representatives, the students are ready to make such a system an inseparable part of the university.

It can be concluded that University of Maribor has set high goals in the development of quality but mostly in the area of teaching and learning. To establish a Centre for staff development with the emphasis on training the teachers and to promote student centred learning is the priority that will require a lot of positive initiative from the leadership and institution wide support for shaping the quality culture.

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### **Questions for discussion:**

Are there any other examples of the students' influence in the process of teacher's promotion or evaluation results implementation at other HE institutions?

Do you think that the quality of teaching competences could improve if the criteria of promotion for teaching and learning would include equally worth measurements or pointing system as for the scientific research work?

What other approaches/indicators do you know that foster/measure the quality of teaching and learning?

Is there room for students' involvement in university and faculty leadership?

How can students play a more productive role in QA in our institutions?