WP5
QA representatives and Staff Site Visit at *Spiru Haret* University
Short report

The University *Spiru Haret* hosted between 6th and 9th June 2017 the visit of the Armenians partners within the ESPAQ project, WP5 activities (WP5.3 deliverable) according to the work plan.

The aim of the visit was a better understanding and good practices exchange in engaging the students in QA at the institutional level

The event was attended by the following participants:

ASPU: Kristine Tanajyan, Nersik Margaryan
NPUA: Karapet Kogarov, Gevorg Harutyunyan
NUACA: Irina Vanyan
ANSA: Sargis Astryants
SHU: Mihai Andronie
SHU: Eugen Ghiorghiță

For each day were established learning outcomes in order to give a consistent order with other study visits and may compare in the end the results with the expectations.

According to the Agenda of the staff site visit, the participants could benefit by the following outcomes:

- Getting acquainted about the SHU QA Management System;
- Becoming familiar with quality procedures in e-learning course
- Learning about examples of monitoring and quality indicators in the university system;
- Becoming acquainted on self assessment, evaluation and students' participation in QA activities
- Witnessing basic QA practical approach at national level;
- Learning the importance of psychological assessment tools in career counselling
- Non-conventional distance open and long life learning systems

During the first day of the study-visit, Tuesday 6th, a short introduction was put forward by Mihai Andronie. Mihai spoke about the host-university, and the experience acquired during the last ten years in higher education quality assurance. The period "ten years" was often mentioned during the presentations and discussions, pointing out that a new authority gradually determined the behaviour and mentality of HEI stakeholders. The new authority in the scope of QA was ARACIS, the Romanian QA Agency for Higher Education.

It was the turn of Eugen Ghiorghiță to take the floor and invite the guests to talk freely and openly about real situations, actual matter of facts and difficulties in meeting the new norms, standards and regulations. In his presentation, Eugen spoke about the SHU QA Management System. Within the last twenty years the HEI's framework in Romania was rather turbulent than stable. Starting from 2006-2007 the Romanian Higher Education Institutions had to face the implementation of Bologna system. Eugen emphasised the similar positions of both Armenia and Romania HEI situation, as European quality standards

"importers". As in all other social and economic fields, people in both countries had to face exhaustive and, to some extent, exhausting institutional changes.

A like mentality specific to all ex-socialist countries preserved a somewhat propensity to mime observing rules, than actually obeying them. At first, it was hard to understand the new concepts of "standards" and "performance indicators". Although everybody admitted that the quality approach was not at all a new topic. It was specific to socialist education as well, and even in a drastic and rigid form. At this point, Irina Vanyan from NUACA agreed that some years ago it was difficult to her as well to explain her teaching staff colleagues the same thing. Then, it was problematic to systematically and fluently apply them. Kristine Tanajyan from ASPU confirmed that the influence of ESPAQ project was really effective in spreading the QA benchmarks among students. The discussion slipped gradually to the measure in which students are and can be made aware of the QA assurance aspects.

After a short coffee break Eugen spoke about counselling and tutoring the students. An important difference between the state and private universities was underlined. The general assessment in ex-socialist countries tended to consider the state universities as better situated from the point of view of QA than the private ones. The Armenian guests confirmed that this mentality was common to their country, too. Eugen mentioned further that the average age of the students is around 21-22 in the state universities, as in the private ones it might be around 27-28. The majority of the students in the state universities are not working, but just studying, while an important number of the students in the private universities have jobs and must pay their fees. In order to foster the participation of working students in courses and seminaries one of the most important results of the tutoring activities was the flexibility of the timetable. So, most of the teaching activities were scheduled in the afternoons, after 14.00, 16.00 or 18.00 o'clock and others on Saturday.

Another way to meet the specific needs of the students was the introduction of the e-learning Blackboard Platform since 2006. The Platform permanently assured and assures for students, tutors and the teaching staff to be in touch and communicate effectively. There are procedures and regulations specific to e-learning activities which are implemented and assessed by the Faculty Quality Evaluation Commission.

Although in the beginning the Blackboard Platform was destined prevailing to distance learning and part time learning students, it has always supplied all the necessary information for full-time

attendance as well: curriculum, syllabuses, teaching staff contacts, courses, syntheses, bibliography, and practical exercises, as well as self-assessment tests, discussions forum, and midterm evaluations. A debate arose around the efficacy and objectivity of the e-learning evaluation. The conclusion was that face-to-face examinations are preferable to computer examination, or should be combined with them. However this is the SHU practice.

The interactive presentation referred further to students' representation. In both countries the general standards stipulate that students are represented in the university and faculty bodies in a proportion of 25%. Also the participants agreed that the involvement of students in QA was voluntary and not the outcome of any selection. Eugen recalled the SPARQS and NUS lessons collected during the visit to Edinburgh within ESPAQ activities. In Scotland there already was accustomed to call for reps volunteers and train them to become QA expert students. It should be the next step for SHU. Kristina and Karapet asserted that in their universities such trainings have also been introduced recently.

Mihai concluded with the outcomes of the day: getting acquainted about the SHU QA Management System and becoming familiar with quality procedures in e-learning course respectively.
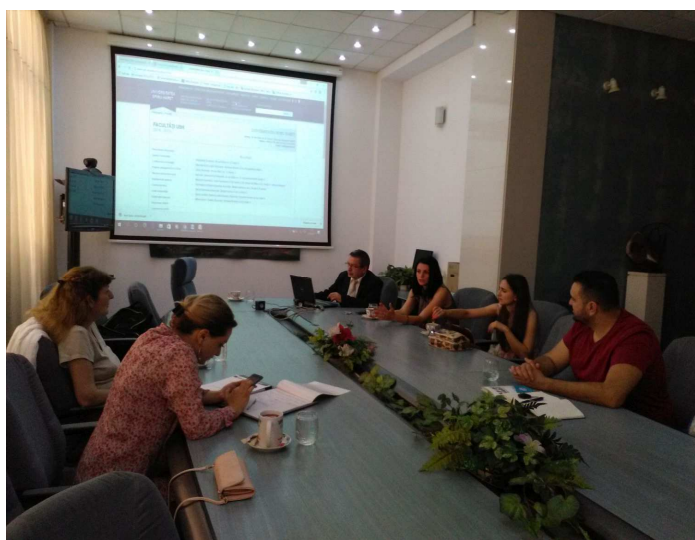
The meeting was followed by lunch in a traditional restaurant in Down Town.

The second day, Wednesday, 7th of June occasioned the meeting with SHU students. During the discussions the Armenian participants asked questions about the involvement of the Romanian students in QA topics. Eugen suggested different levels of possible participation of the students in QA activities: *awareness*, *interest*, *involvement* and *commitment*. The SHU students present at the meeting with the Armenian partners were already accustomed with QA problems, as they had participated in meetings with the Armenian students in the previous ESPAQ visit in November. They also met the ARACIS commission by the study programme assessment visit. In spite of that, they considered themselves as only "aware" and "interested". They admitted that "involved" and "committed" was a little bit hard to become, because this would require more time dedicated to such activities. But they know their reps and can solve all their problems whenever necessary.
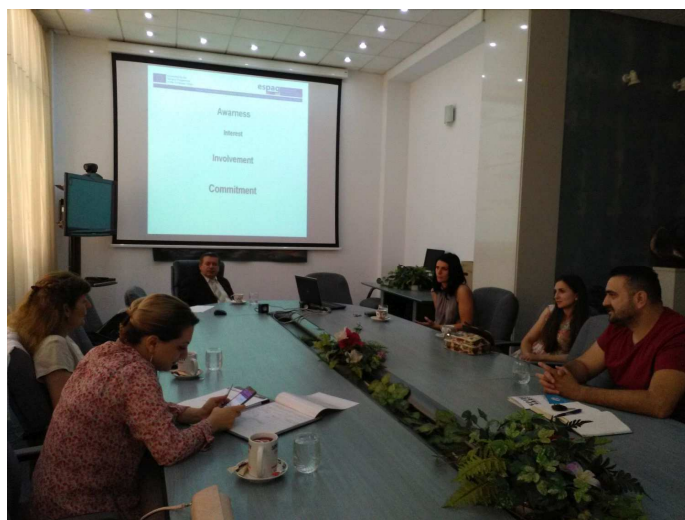
Irina and Kristina were interested in finding out how could the students who already have a job participate in all the activities at the Faculty. The Romanian students answered that the timetable was scheduled to meet their needs, so, they could come in the afternoons and in weekends. They also mentioned the role of the e-learning Platform, which offered them all the necessary information and learning resources. They could also benefit, and they actually benefit by tutoring planned hours.

The Romanian students presented their role in monitoring the achievement of the performance indicators. They don't act directly, but by the

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intermediary of their representatives in the faculty's bodies. The main role in monitoring is that of the students' representative in the Commission for the Quality Evaluation and Assurance (CEAC) at the faculty level. Along with one representative of the employers, the students' rep participates in the verification of documents and of the ways the quality standards and performance indicators are observed and achieved. On the other hand, the students' reps in the Faculty Council and University Senate have the opportunity to influence decisions of the two bodies concerning the students' interests. The Armenian partners compared the related participation of the SHU students identifying similitude and difference with their own activities.

After a coffee break Claudia Baicu, Assoc. Professor with a long practice in the quality assurance spoke about the assessment of the teaching staff at SHU and the students' role. Claudia presented the multi-criteria evaluation, consisting of peer review, the evaluation performed by students and the self-evaluation. The Armenian partners were mostly interested in the teachers' evaluation by the students, and the content of the questionnaire the students have to fill in. Claudia detailed the main categories of questions, related to quality of "Courses", quality of "Teaching the course", and of "Practical activities", "Evaluation" and, finally, "Relations with the students". Discussions followed about most of the quality indicators. It was mentioned that not all the students may evaluate the teachers, but only those who attended at least 40% of the total courses and seminaries.

Mihai concluded with the outcomes of the day: learning about examples of monitoring and quality indicators in the university system and becoming acquainted on self assessment, evaluation and students' participation in QA activities.

The 3rd day, Thursday the 8th of June started with a visit to ARACIS Headquarters. The participants were welcomed by Prof. Radu Damian, Director of the International Relations, Projects and Cooperation Department.

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Professor Damian traced the course of ARACIS achievements after 2006. Certainly, ARACIS did not have to start everything from anew. A big deal of expertise and good practice had been inherited from the former CNEAA (National Council of Academic Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions). However the Bologna process which was introduced in Romania after 2005 required new methodologies, new regulations, new standards, in short a new QA management system. Moreover, not all the universities adopted overnight the new norms. So, the gearing process within the new institutional framework took several years. This is why ARACIS undertook as its first mission counselling and advising the Romanian HEI to adapt to the new rules rather than acting as a „judge" or „prosecutor". Using many examples arising from a lively experience, Professor Damian emphasised, on the other hand, the role of ARACIS in enforcing the new quality standards.

The presentation was interactive, so, many questions arose. Sargis Astryants, representative of ANSA, was interested in universities' autonomy insurance. If there are so severe norms, how is the liberty of the university still guaranteed? Professor Damian asserted that the autonomy is fully respected, but within the legal framework. Especially during a transition period from one system to another system, implementing new rules involved an apparent suppression of autonomy.

Eugen stressed that the "full autonomy" system invoked by Sargis remains only a long-term objective. It could be achievable only in a system governed and implicitly characterized by a "culture of quality". He further explained that in the beginning, i.e. between 1995 and 2008, the intervention of the Government as well as that of the QA reps were considered as affecting the university's autonomy. The contacts with ARACIS and the stable framework enforced by the Education Act in 2011 greatly modified the quality topics approach. The image of ARACIS changed gradually from that of an *inexorable judge* to that of a *counsellor* or *tutor* in terms of HEI QA.

Irina and Kristina got detailed answers concerning the students' involvement in ARACIS evaluations teams. Professor Damian explained that QA student experts were already playing an great role during the institutional evaluation visits. Eugen pointed that during an institutional assessment visit, the ARACIS team student members were the most "dangerous" of all the members of the team,

adding that his saying shouldn't be taken only as a joke: they could identify various weaknesses of the QA process in the assessed university more easily than their senior expert mates.

After the visit to ARACIS all the participants returned to the University headquarters. After a short break Assoc. Professor Bogdan Danciu put forward a rather more specialized presentation "Career counselling using psychological assessment tools". Bogdan spoke about the essential objectives of counselling and orientation services for students. The mentioned services should help students to better understand and evaluate themselves, to communicate effectively with each others, to draw up plans for their own career and appropriate training, to consider alternative careers, and to successfully face the serious obstacles to gaining a place in society and on the labour market.

From general notions, Professor Danciu went to a practical approach of the mission and activity of the Center of Career Counselling and Orientation of *Spiru Haret* University (CCOC). He specified that CCOC's mission Specific mission of C.C.O.C. consists in "providing and promoting an environment conducive to individual development by offering a diverse range of counseling and career guidance services to those interested both from *Spiru Haret* University, students, teachers, staff engaged in other activities as well as outside beneficiaries".

The most important point of the presentation was the essential aim of the counseling activities: making clear for the students that their voice matters. They can, not despite but by virtue of their quality of students, influence the educational environment. If they manage to do so, this would be the mark of their own progress in self-determination along the next years of their post-university years.

Answering to questions addresses by the participants, Bogdan explained how the counseling activities were developed with the CCOC at the University level and within the faculties.

As usually, at the end of the last presentation, Mihai concluded with the rich outcomes of the day: witnessing basic QA practical approach at national level during the ARACIS level and learning the importance of psychological assessment tools in career counselling and in raising the students' awareness about QA topics.

The day finished with a short walk through the Old Bucharest Armenian neighbourhood and the visit of the Armenian Church followed by lunch.

The fourth Day, Friday, 9th of June started at the University Headquarter followed by the travel to the Campus "Berceni" of the University. There the meeting was hosted by the Faculty of *Juridical, Political and Administrative Sciences*. The

participants were welcomed by Assoc. Professor Roxana Păun, QA responsible and the students' rep within CEAC.

There was no properly "presentation" but vivid discussions around various examples about the role and the involvement of students in QA activities. Based on the *Operational Procedures* and the *Quality Management Handbook* the Armenian participants found out how the students' rep is effectively involved in the consistent QA processes.

The student's representative explained that the acquaintance of the quality procedures is assumed by the students by direct participation in the faculty's bodies. Being present at the QA Commission and Faculty Council's meetings, the students' reps "learn by doing" the application of the methodologies and procedures. The idea of a necessary specific training was mentioned during the discussions, although the practical learning seemed to be more attractive.

The discussion also touched the non-conventional distance and long life open learning where the educational television plays an important role within *Spiru Haret* University.

The Armenian participants were introduced to the great facilities offered by the SHU television – TVH. Some courses were broadcast live, so students could ask questions. Most of the courses were recorded and broadcast repeatedly during the semester at different hours during the day or the night.

After a short break, the participants visited *Spiru Haret* Television Studios. During the visit of the studios Irina, Kristine and Sargis were invited to give interviews.