
STUDENT'S ROLE IN INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE (IQA) (ON THE EXAMPLE OF ONE OF THE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF GEORGIA)

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Abstract

One of the fundamental issues of higher education is the engagement of students in the process of internal quality assurance of education. Using the example of one of the private higher educational institutions of Georgia, the article studies the factors of student involvement in internal quality assurance, the main problems and the attitude of students and institutions to this process.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the research. Qualitative research was conducted with representatives of European student unions and private university quality assurance services, while quantitative research included students from a target private higher education institution. The paper is based on the Bologna processes, which led to significant changes in the internal quality assurance in higher education institutions in the part of student engagement. Based on the Bologna processes, it can be said that the role of the student, his views and evaluations are of fundamental importance in the formation of the higher education system of Georgia. The research process made visible the problems and challenges related to the involvement of students in internal quality assurance in higher education institutions. Based on the results of the research, recommendations were developed that would help higher education institutions to improve student participation and involvement in internal quality assurance.

Keywords: *Internal quality assurance, quality management, student engagement*

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Introduction

Any higher educational institution can establish an appropriate quality culture, which will be focused on continuous development. Effective implementation of quality assurance requires the equal involvement of all persons, such as students, staff, administrative and academic staff, alumni and all other stakeholders (Guidelines for the Assessment of Standards for Accreditation of Higher Education Programs).

The Bologna Process has placed increasing emphasis on the importance of student engagement in quality assurance of higher education. In particular, higher education institutions were given the responsibility to promote student participation in the internal activities of the institution and to give importance to the need for student partnership in achieving the goals set for the European Higher Education Area (Alaniska H., 2006). It should be noted that the Bologna Process was responded to by the Prague Communiqué, which highlighted that higher education is "as a public domain that is and remains a public responsibility, and that students are full members of the higher education community" (Prague Communiqué, 2001). The quality assurance standards and guidelines of the European area of higher education emphasize that the higher educational institution is primarily responsible for the quality of educational activities and its provision and describes the rights and duties assigned to higher educational institutions regarding the involvement of students in internal degrees (**ESG – 2015**). According to this standard, "the institution must ensure that the program is delivered in a way that encourages students to play an active role in shaping the learning process" (ESG, 2015, 28). According to the standard, students are the participants of the institution who objectively see and evaluate the processes.

The Bologna processes laid the foundation for important reforms in the education system in Georgia. The responsibility of higher education institutions has increased, which should ensure the maximum engagement of students at the institutional level of the institution and take into account European quality assurance standards. In the wake of legislative changes in Georgia, the role of the student in internal and external provision has also increased. In particular, students became members of the governing bodies of the higher educational institution, the need for students' engagement in the development and implementation of the strategic development plan/mission of the university, as well as development of the program was determined; The role of student experts is also worth noting, which emphasizes even more the fundamental importance of students in the university space. Engagement of students is also carried out through surveys, participation in focus groups, meetings with them and participation of students in self-assessment groups (Orders of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia No. 89/H, 65/H). Based on this, students express their own initiatives and make certain evaluations in the higher educational institution.

Based on the above, it is interesting to study how much the student is actually engaged in the internal quality assurance processes of the higher educational institution and what challenges and perspectives are in this direction in private higher educational institutions. It should be noted that in the Georgian reality, the issues of engagement of the student's role in ensuring internal quality have not been systematically studied on the example of a private university, and this is what determines the **novelty and relevance** of this article.

Based on the research objective, research questions were defined: a) the attitude of the private university in terms of students' engagement in internal quality processes, how much the institution encourages students to participate in internal quality management issues. b) Students' attitudes and willingness to be engaged in internal quality assurance, assessment of the quality of involvement and identification of challenges.

Based on the research goals and research issues, a **mixed** research type was used within the research; In particular, in order to discuss the issue in depth, **four face-to-face** interviews were conducted with a representative of the European Student Union (ESU), a representative of the Association of Georgian Student Organizations (SOA), a representative of the quality assurance service of a private university, and a member of the self-government; **Two focus groups** were conducted with students who are members of representative and faculty councils of a private university, as well as a quantitative study was conducted with 141 students of the Georgian language program with active and suspended status of the selected private university.

Research limitations, obstacles and risks: The present study is a study of the engagement of students in internal quality assurance processes in one private higher educational institution, and therefore the results of the study cannot be disseminated to public higher educational institutions; In addition, within the scope of the quantitative research, there was no survey of international students on how equally they are engaged in internal quality management issues;

Results of qualitative research

Within the framework of the research, the primary information received from the respondents was typologized, by means of which both different and common views of the respondents towards the research topic were distinguished.

Similar assessments of representatives of the European Student Union (ESU) and the Association of Georgian Student Organizations (SOA) regarding student engagement in the **internal quality assurance of a higher educational institution** were revealed during the interview process. Respondents named the mechanisms through which student engagement takes place. This is done through representation and participation of students on faculty councils, through their surveys, meetings and student engagement in self-assessment groups. They believe that the works in terms of student engagement should be strengthened: "The rate of student engagement has increased significantly, but some work needs to be done in this regard, which will increase the awareness among students so that the students themselves can see that it is their recommendation to the university that gets a certain result".

The representative of the Association of Student Organizations of Georgia (SOA) noted that cooperation with students has recently increased in Georgia, students in turn participate in the evaluation process, a self-evaluation group cannot be established without a student and a graduate. Also, students go to interviews during the authorization and accreditation period, they take part in surveys, they provide some advice and recommendations to universities, students are evaluators as experts. The respondent believes that overall there is quite good cooperation between students and universities in Georgia.

Students who are members of representative and faculty councils expressed interesting opinions regarding student engagement. They noted that, depending on their role, they could express their views and opinions, however, they criticized the use of the electronic survey mechanism in the internal quality assurance process. They believe that apart from template questions and electronic format, it would be better to use other additional tools to interact with students and the given format does not allow any type of initiative to be revealed. Therefore, in their opinion, personal interviews with students are important.

Regarding the engagement of students in the higher educational institution, both student council members and self-government representatives believe that students **are less active for various reasons and do not try to express their evaluations towards the university**: *"The university, as a structured form, is an educational institution and still a bureaucracy. In order for a student to express his opinion, he must still fit into certain legal frameworks. Therefore, some people are too lazy to express their opinion "... Students' engagement is mainly expressed by the evaluation of the lecturers at the end of the studies, by the evaluation of the university in general, and in my opinion, it is a bit patterned, because there are the same questions and some may avoid it, and it is often the case that they shy away and do not express their opinion..."*

It was revealed that students who are members of the faculty council cooperate more with self-government than students who are members of the representative council. All respondents unanimously noted that students need to be more informed about their rights and responsibilities. It was noted that it would be good **to carry out several activities** where students would thoroughly learn about their rights, which would help them understand more about the fundamental role they have in the effective functioning of a higher educational institution. *"It is important to find some formats to provide information to students, to run some type of campaign, so that they can interest students, The student should feel that the university is a part of him, it is not separate and independent, it is a living organism, the driving force of which is the student. There is no university without students. Therefore, the university should encourage such students to actively participate in these processes".*

An interview with a **representative of the quality assurance service** of a private university was interesting and important, who focused on the fundamental importance of the student in quality assurance, considering the **student as a partner** of the institution, who is both the receiver and creator of the service, noting that in his institution, students' feedback is intensively received, analyzed, reported and relevant recommendations determined. One of the main initiators of the changes implemented in the university so far are the students and their feedback. Therefore, in his opinion, student surveys are the best mechanism for the effective functioning of the quality assurance service.

The representative of the quality assurance service focused on the engagement of students in the council meetings. He noted that according to statistical data, there was no council that was not attended by at least one student, which means that any decision made by collegial bodies in the university does not exist without the participation of a student.

A similar attitude of students who are members of the quality assurance service and the faculty council regarding the low involvement of students was revealed. Respondents believe that there are many reasons why students do not/cannot participate in university educational or recreational activities. They focused on the lack of student motivation, resulting in less student interest and engagement.

Similar opinions were recorded by the representative of the quality assurance service and the member of the faculty council regarding informing the students. Respondents believe that it is better to have more feedback with students, which will increase their activity and engagement. The representative of the quality assurance service talks about the challenges as well: he considers it important to inform the students about how the institution evaluated the students' opinions, what decisions were made by the university based on these evaluations. he thinks that the university needs to strengthen its own policy **as part of the feedback mechanism** with students. also highlighted one of the important **challenges** related to student initiatives. The respondent noted that students rarely express an opinion about what will develop the university, what will be a specific large-scale project that will benefit the university. Surveys generally show that students want to improve learning conditions. An interview with a representative of the quality service and a member of the self-government revealed that they do not cooperate with each other and did not cross paths regarding student engagement. The representative of the quality service drew attention to the importance of self-government as an independent body and noted that they have a fundamental importance in university activities, especially in the part of student engagement.

Thus, all respondents participating in the research clearly emphasized the fundamental importance of the student, the value of the student opinion in the effective functioning of the university, each of them spoke about challenges, problems and issues for improvement..

Quantitative research results

The results of the quantitative research show that students have a certain, but incomplete, idea about the activities of the university's education quality assurance service. According to them, the function of the service is to monitor and improve the teaching-learning process (67%), to study the problems related to students' learning (47%) and the processes of accreditation of study program and university authorization (44%). 64% of the surveyed students state that they have no business-type communication with the quality assurance service. A large majority (88%) state that the university receives feedback mainly through questionnaires

filled out by students (evaluation of educational courses, evaluation of professors and teachers, evaluation of services, etc.). Additionally, only 59% report participating in these surveys, which is an average result in the student engagement section. The respondents recorded their own opinion about the engagement in the events planned by the student self-government/unions, where it was clearly revealed that only 47% expressed active engagement in the events.

It was interesting to see the students' assessment of the general engagement of students in university management issues (see diagram 1). The largest number of surveyed students evaluated engagement with 5 points out of 10 points.

Overall, on a 10-point scale, rate your engagement in university management issues

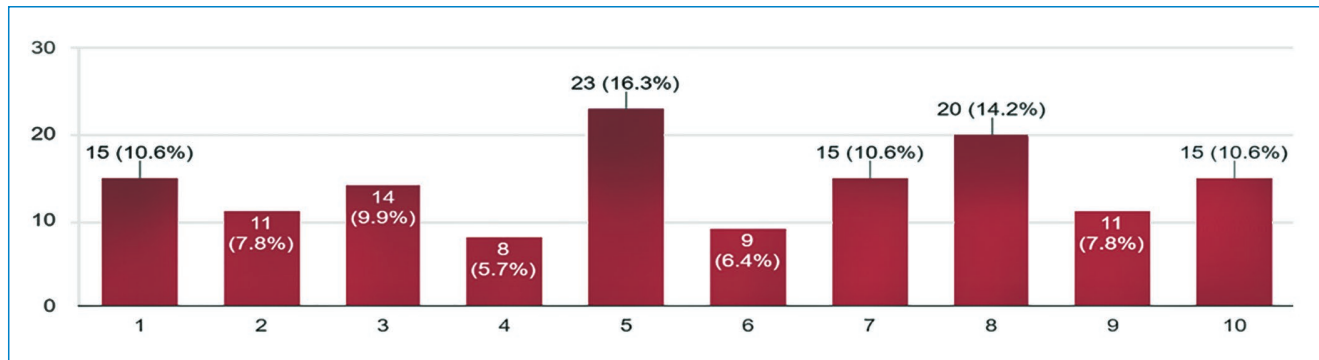


Figure 1: Student engagement in university management

As for evaluations regarding student involvement in university quality management issues, only 40% of respondents positively evaluate their engagement in internal quality improvement activities at the university (informational meetings, surveys), while 42% share opinions related to the development of the quality of teaching and learning with representatives of student unions. Only a part of the surveyed students (50%) consider that they have sufficient competence to contribute to the improvement of the internal quality of university activities.

It is clear from the above that students do not have active cooperation with the university administration, lecturers and representatives of student unions, which is directly related to the low engagement of students in quality assurance.

A fundamentally important factor for students' engagement in internal quality assurance is the degree to which students understand that they are partners with the university and the degree to which they feel like members of the university. The majority of surveyed students (67%) believe that they feel like members/partners of the university and believe (69%) that they have the opportunity to influence internal quality assurance processes, however, in order to increase student engagement in internal quality management issues, the university administration should cooperate more actively with students (74%).

The students' assessment of cooperation with self-government is interesting. The majority of surveyed students note that communication with self-government needs to be improved, in particular 71% of students do not cooperate or partially cooperate with self-government.

Thus, in the results of the quantitative research, the problems that were identified during the qualitative research were highlighted once again; Based on the results of the research, the following **recommendations** were developed:

- It is recommended to review the format of the Council meetings and, in addition to remote meetings, to schedule face-to-face meetings and informal meetings, which would contribute to greater involvement and strengthening of cooperative relations;
- For the purpose of student engagement, it is important to improve communication between the quality assurance service, student self-government and representative/faculty member students;

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- In order to increase the engagement of students in the internal quality management, it is important for the quality assurance service to hold informative meetings in order to raise awareness in this direction, as well as to provide students with feedback and to strengthen the dialogue with students;
 - informing students about their rights and duties should be strengthened; It would be better to conduct several lectures or courses, where students will thoroughly learn about their rights, which will help them to understand more about the fundamental role they have in the effective functioning of a higher educational institution;
 - Transparency of processes – it would be better to make it more clear what results students and graduates bring to the university;
 - To be improved mechanisms for encouraging student initiatives.

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