
Student Organizations and Their Contribution to Quality Assurance and Enhancement in Higher Education Institutions – Case Study: Romania

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the involvement of student organizations toward quality assurance and enhancement in higher education institutions in Romania. In order to achieve this purpose, a survey among student organizations from the main university cities in Romania has been conducted between December 2013 and May 2014. In order to analyze the results we used the frequency distribution method. One of the main findings of this paper is that there is a strong desire of a high quality education among student organizations, yet some of them do not become involved in activities contributing to quality assurance and enhancement. This paper can become a valuable tool for policy makers of the Romanian national students federations in order to design the best policies meant to encourage all the organizations participate in the quality assurance and enhancement process.

Keywords: higher education, student organizations, quality assurance, survey

JEL Classification: I – Health, Education and Welfare;

INTRODUCTION

Assurance and enhancement of quality of educational process in higher education is a major concern for both universities and stakeholders. There are many approaches toward defining quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education. According to (Lewis et.al. 2013, 8), quality assurance is „the standard that has been agreed on, usually with a national body, about what requirements and levels are necessary for a study programme

to be awarded a degree”, while quality enhancement is „the process aiming at improving the quality of study courses, ensuring a positive impact on the students’ learning experience”.

The statement of Prague (2001) recognizes that *„students are full members of the university community and constructive partners”* and that *„their involvement in the quality assurance process is both necessary and welcomed”* (Ministerial Conference – Prague Communiqué 2001, 3). The statement of Berlin (2003) pointed out *„the role of students and student organizations in creating a true European higher education community”*; furthermore, the statement explicitly mentions *„student participation in national systems of quality assurance at all levels”* (Ministerial Conference – Berlin Communiqué 2003, 2-3).

Since Berlin (2003), students’ involvement in quality assurance at European, national and local level has preoccupied the higher education community. In a survey among the national student unions conducted by the European Students’ Union, more than a half of the organizations considered that students are partners in the quality assurance process or that the level of student participation is high enough: *“through providing feedback to courses they have taken, participating in the process of decision-making in universities or contributing to the enhancement of teaching-learning experiences, students across Europe have become true partners in the academic world”* (European Students’ Union 2012, 120).

Yet, there are many challenges ahead to be overcome, especially for developing countries such as Romania. In Romania there is a specific legislation that enforces students rights and offers a solid framework for student unions to involve in the academic process. According to articles 4 and 5 of the annex of Ministerial order 3666/2012 that legally enforces the Code of students’ rights and obligations: *„legally functioning student organizations have the right to use university spaces in order to organize activities for students; universities collaborate with the student unions for the enhancement of the higher education area; legally functioning student unions elaborate an annual report about the compliance with the the Code of students’ rights and obligations; this report should be published on the website of the university before the beginning of each academic year”.*

As the legal framework for the student organizations to involve themselves in the process of quality assurance and enhancement is already established and the authorities at both european and national level recognized these organizations as partners, the question remains whether or not student organizations materialize this rights. This paper aims to analyze the involvement of student organizations in quality assurance and enhancement in

higher education institutions in Romania. The first part herein discusses how student unions in different countries across the European Higher Education Area have managed to contribute to the improvement of some features in their universities, taking thus a step forward to a high quality education; both the involvement in quality assurance and quality enhancement are taken into consideration. In its' second part the paper will present an investigation among the Romanian student organizations based on a survey, in order to determine their contribution to a high quality educational process.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS' INVOLVEMENT ACROSS EUROPE

According to (Alaniska and Erriksson 2006, 13), in Finland, „*all undergraduate students automatically become members of their local student union*”, which is responsible for „*selecting student representatives to participate in all official decision-making bodies in a university*”; also, students belong to student associations at subject level and each of these associations has at least a person responsible for educational matters – more specifically, these local associations collect feedback about the student learning experience and organize workshops with students and teachers in order to discuss the results (Alaniska and Erriksson 2006, 13-15). Some clarifications on the student-learning experience are necessary. According to (Lewis et al. 2012, 10), the student learning experience „*consists of the total processes of how the student is learning and is being taught*”. More specifically, according to the same authors, the student learning experience can be divided into the following parts (Lewis et al. 2012, 11-16):

- *The curriculum* (course content and structure);
- *Learning resources* (learning resources and materials; learning environment)
- *Assessment and feedback* (structure and impartiality of the assessment);
- *Student progression and achievement* (course efficiency in preparing students for thier careers)
- *Guidance and learners' support by the institution;*
- *Quality enhancement of the student learning experience.*

An interesting example of how student unions and universities can collaborate in order to improve the educational process is the N5T-Student unions partnership. N5T stands for a strategic alliance of the five leading technical universities in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. According to the N5T website (<http://www.nordicfivetechnic.org/Joint-Projects/Student->

union-collaboration accessed 26.11.2013, 19:50), one of their key projects concerns the collaboration with the student unions in order to create a N5T extended campus; as a result of this project, the N5T organizations have created a platform “to support the exchange of experience and best practice on how to run a student organization” including how “students can contribute to quality assurance” and how “student organizations can take part in the creation of a stimulating study environment”.

(Makinen and Nyman 2008, 2) emphasize the importance of student unions’ independence from the university in order to truly contribute to the quality assurance process. One interesting aspect of student organizations and their relationship with the university is mentioned by (Kreike 2013, 4): in the Netherlands, at the University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, student representatives are organized into a student association; the university, in cooperation with this association, organizes different trainings concerning quality assurance and enhancement, but also personal development sessions for other students.

(Bohrer 2006, 24-28) states that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, student unions in universities submit a Student Written Submission at every external quality assurance visit; this report is considered a valuable document, as it leads to the enhancement of the relationship between students and the university and to improvements in the campus; also more and more student unions have included quality assurance among their priorities. Several innovative practices on student involvement in quality enhancement come from Scotland (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2009, 9, 19): here, student representatives in some universities must attend training sessions organized by the student associations in partnership with the institutions; these training sessions aim to clarify students rights and obligations; furthermore, student associations work with the institutions’ quality enhancement unit in order to establish a student representation strategy; also, periodical formal meetings between teachers, faculty board members and student association representatives on quality assurance and enhancement are organized; at least, student associations are usually involved in developing the faculties/universities strategic plan.

Student unions can also contribute to quality assurance and enhancement through participating in higher education governance. As stated in the General Report of the Official Bologna seminar held in Aghveran, Armenia in 2011, “*student organizations as partners in the educational process, are responsible for the provision of information on student participation in higher education governance and learning processes; also, they need to encourage diversity within their own structures and dialogue among their members*” (European Council 2011, 9).

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the involvement of student organizations toward quality assurance and enhancement in higher education institutions in Romania, a survey among student organizations representatives has been conducted between december 2013 and may 2014.

The questionnaire was sent via e-mail to student organizations from the following cities (the number of the respondent organizations are stated in brackets): Bacău (1), Braşov (1), Bucharest (17), Cluj-Napoca (3), Constanţa (2), Craiova (1), Galaţi (1), Hunedoara (1), Iaşi (3), Oradea (3), Petroşani (1), Piteşti (1), Ploieşti (1), Reşiţa (2), Tîrgu Jiu (1), Timişoara (3), Tîrgu Mureş (1). Thus, the 43 student organizations that answered to the questionnaire cover the main university cities in Romania.

The questionnaire has been organized as follows:

- a) Five questions gathering data on the organization (name, city, the number of students in the partner university, the percentage of the student population member of the organization, the mission of the organization); the city of the organization was chosen as variable for controlling the representativeness, as it has been tried to cover as many university cities as possible; the other variables were chosen in order to design a brief image of the student organizations in Romania;
- b) One question on the legislative framework in Romania, on its' ability to contribute in establishing a partnership between the organizations and the university;
- c) Five questions about the perception on the relationship between the organization and the university considering quality assurance;
- d) One question on the perception of the student organizations' representatives on 9 aspects of the quality assurance in the university;
- e) Three questions on the attitude of the student organization on 11 aspects of the quality assurance in the university;
- f) One question on the involvement of the student organization in the evaluation of academic staff;
- g) One question covering the student organizations' activities in the academic year 2012-2013;
- h) One question regarding the importance of communication for student organizations;
- i) One question regarding the student organizations' independence.

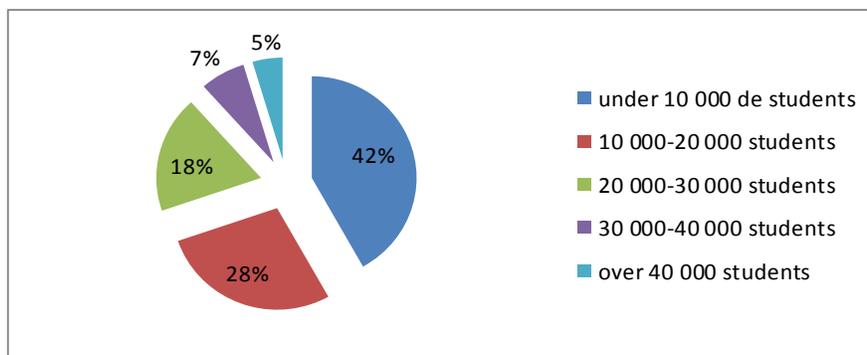
In order to interpret the results, the frequency distribution method was used. Questions regarding the name and the city of the organizations are open; the other three mentioned in point a) as well as those at points e) and f) are multiple choice. Questions mentioned at points b), c), d), h) and i) are 5 points scaled.

RESULTS

The results of the survey showed that 42% of the student organizations come from universities with under 10000 students and only 5% of the student organizations from universities with over 40000 students (figure 1). Most of the student organizations count under 10% of the student population in the university and only one organization counts over 90% of the student population of the university. Considering the missions of the organizations, over half of them are meant to represent the students in their relationship with the university.

DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS BY THE TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN THE PARTNER UNIVERSITY

Figure 1

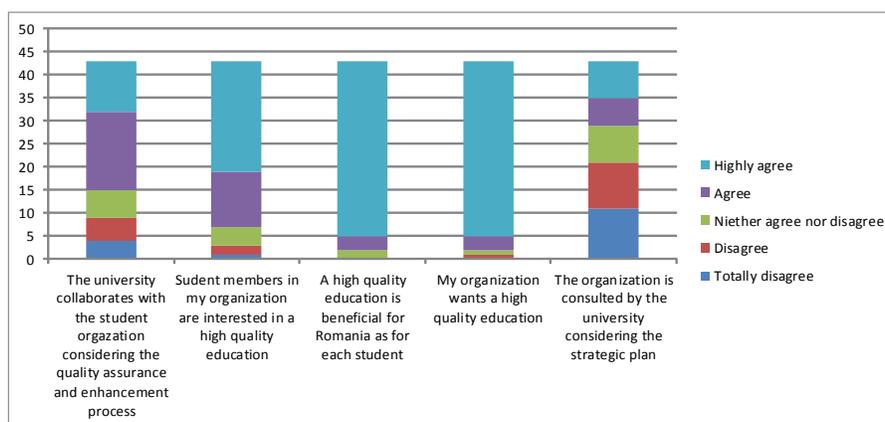


Most of the student organizations representatives percieve that in Romania the legislation ensures a framework for a true partnership between the student organizations and the universities considering quality assurance. Moreover, over half of the respondents declared that the university collaborates well with the organization considering the quality assurance and enhanchement process, as most of the students member in the organization are interested in a high quality education (figure 2). Yet, most of the organizations are not

consulted by the university considering the strategic plan. Approximately 90% of the respondents agree that high quality education is beneficial for Romania, as for each student, and 88% of the organizations desire a high quality education.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS’ REPRESENTATIVES PERCEPTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATION AND THE UNIVERSITY CONSIDERING QUALITY ASSURANCE

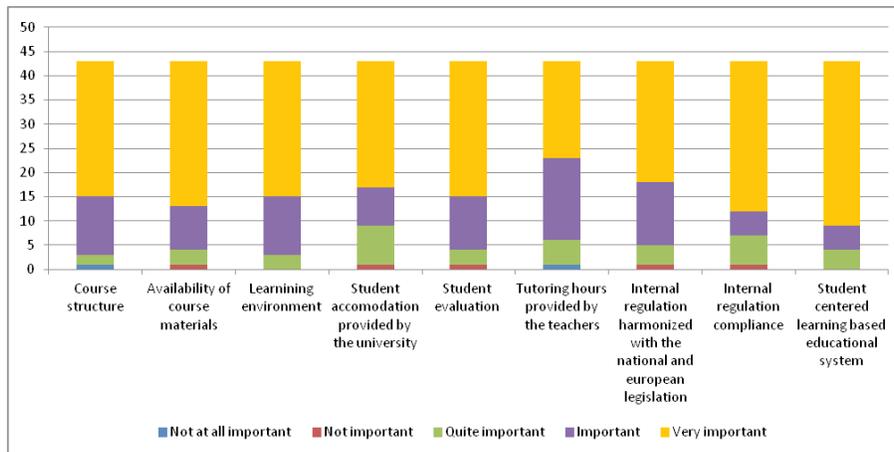
Figure 2



Considering the course structure, availability of the course materials, learning environment, the student evaluation process and a student-centered, learning-based educational system, over 90% of the respondents agree that these are important or very important aspects of the quality assurance process. Other issues of the quality assurance process identified by most of the student organizations’ representatives to be important or very important in the process of quality assurance are: student accommodation facilities provided by the university, tutoring hours provided by the teachers and internal regulation harmonizing and compliance.

**PERCEPTION OF THE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS’
REPRESENTATIVES ON CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE QUALITY
ASSURANCE PROCESS**

Figure 3



Next, the student organizations’ attitude towards the aspects of the quality assurance process mentioned above will be presented. As one can observe from figure 4, approximately 15% of the organizations did not include monitoring in their mission but most of the student organizations that participated in the survey collect feedback on course structure, availability of course materials, learning environment, student accommodation, student evaluation process, tutoring hours, internal regulations harmonization and compliance and the implementation of student-centered, learning-based educational system. Thus, the results on the organizations that monitor these aspects are stated below:

- Considering the course structure and course materials availability, over half of the respondents declared that there was not necessary to formulate any complaints to the university; 15% and respectively 8% of these organizations formulated several complaints to the university, but the university representatives did nothing to solve the problem;
- Over 25% of the organizations, that monitor the quality of the student accommodation provided by the university and the internal regulation compliance formulated several complaints on these aspects to the university, yet the university representatives did not take any action to solve the problems;

- Considering the student evaluation process, the tutoring hours provided by the teachers, the existence of an internal regulation harmonized with the national one and european legislation and the implementation of a student centered learning process, most of the respondents stated that there was not necessary to formulate any complaints to the university.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

Figure 4

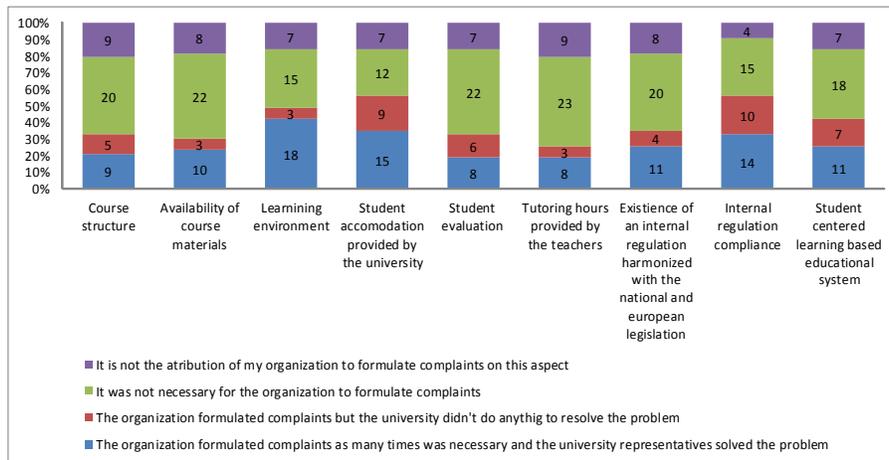
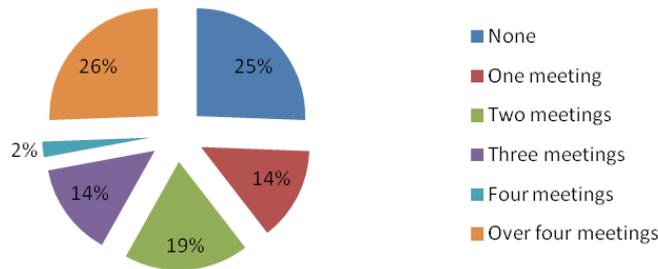


Figure 5 presents the number of meetings on quality assurance, organized by the university, where a representative of the student organization participated in the academic year 2012-2013. As one can observe, 25% of the student organizations did not send any representative in any meeting with the university representatives on quality assurance and 14% of them sent one in only one meeting.

**NUMBER OF MEETINGS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE
ORGANIZED BY THE UNIVERSITY WHERE A REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE STUDENT ORGANIZATION PARTICIPATED IN THE
ACADEMIC YEAR 2012-2013**

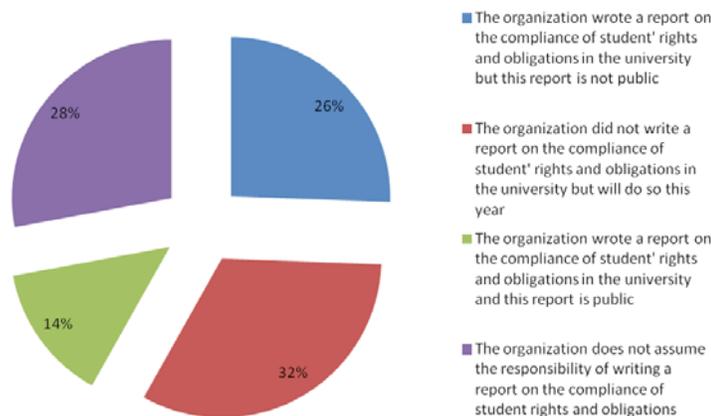
Figure 5



Considering the student organizations' attitude towards the compliance of students rights and obligations, 28% of the organizations do not assume the responsibility of writing a public report. Only 14% of the organizations wrote such a report and uploaded it on their website, were as 26% of the organizations wrote a report, but did not publish it. Also, 32% of the organizations committed themselves in writing such a report this academic year.

**STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE
COMPLIANCE OF THE STUDENT RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS**

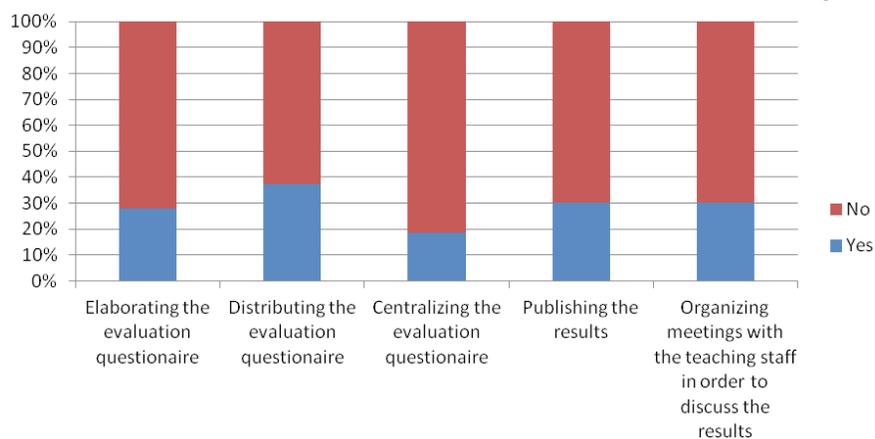
Figure 6



One of the most important and sensitive aspects of quality assurance in universities is the evaluation of the teaching staff's performance by the students. This process has several stages: designing the questionnaire, distributing the questionnaire, centralizing the results, publishing the results and organizing meetings between students and staff in order to discuss the results. Therefore the survey analyzes the implication of student organizations in each stage of the process. Most of the organizations are not part of the evaluation process. Only 3 organizations are involved in all stages.

THE IMPLICATION OF THE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EVALUATION OF THE TEACHING STAFF PERFORMANCE

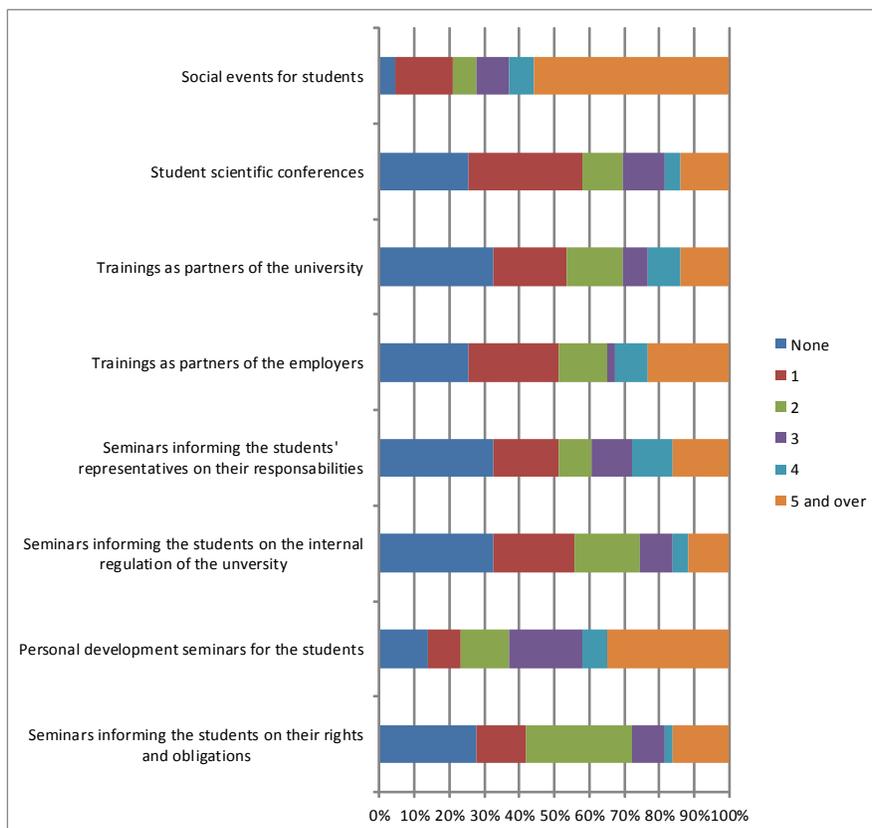
Figure 7



Next, the activities of the student organizations (figure 8) have been briefly analyzed. Every respondent organization, except one, organized at least one event of the following: seminars informing the students of their rights and obligations, personal development seminars for the students, seminars informing the students of the internal regulation of the university, seminars informing the student representatives on their responsibilities, trainings as partners with the employers, trainings as partners with the university, student scientific conferences, social events for students. One very important aspect of this analysis is that over half of the respondent organizations did not organize any seminars on informing the students on the internal regulations of the university or organized only one such seminar in the academic year 2012-2013; the same proportion can be observed regarding the seminars informing the students representatives on their responsibilities. Also, over half of the organizations prepared three or more personal development sessions and social events for students contributing to the enhancement of student's experience.

**STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS' ACTIVITIES IN THE ACADEMIC
YEAR 2012-1013**

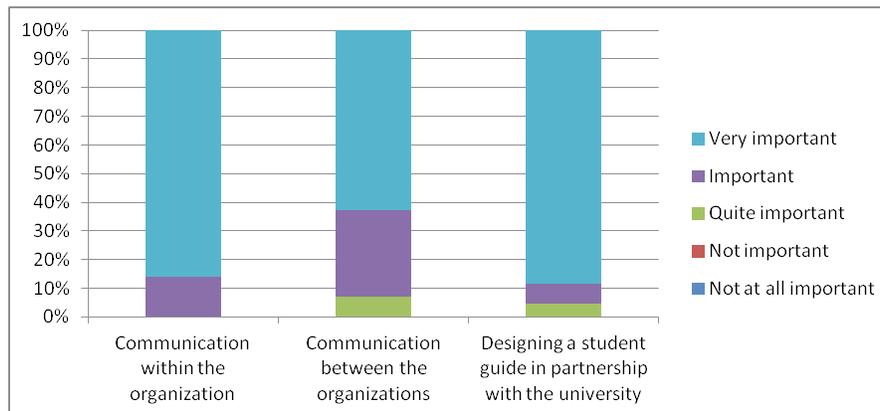
Figure 8



As dialogue among the members of the student organization (and not only) needs to be encouraged, the importance of communication for the student organization has been analyzed (figure 10). Over 80% of the student organizations' representatives agreed that communication between the members of the student organization, as well as designing a student guide in partnership with the university, are very important. Yet, only 62% of the student organizations' representatives agreed that communication between the student organizations is very important.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

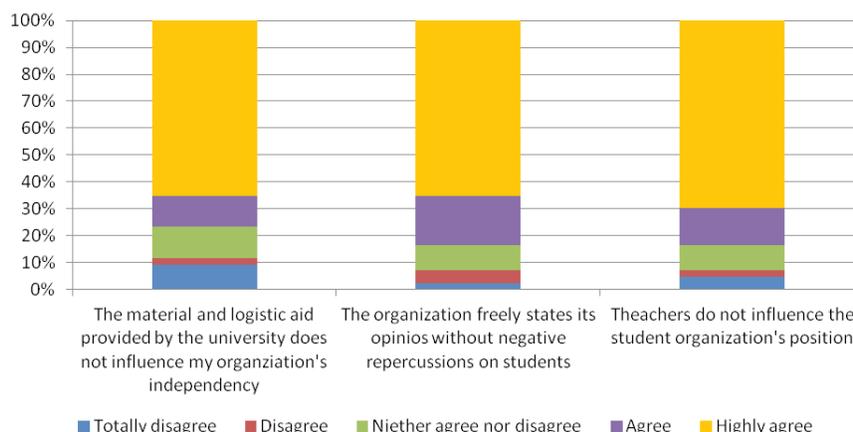
Figure 9



The experience of other student organizations showed that independence is very important in order for the organization to truly participate in the quality assurance and enhancement process. From the study (figure 11) resulted that approximately 65% of the responding organization representatives perceive their organization as truly independent (the material and logistic aid provided by the university does not cause any pressure on the organization and the teachers do not influence the organization's position so the entity can freely state its opinion without repercussions on students). Yet, there are cases where the organization's independency is affected by the teachers' involvement or by the university staff as a result of the logistic and material aid provided.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS' INDEPENDENCE

Figure 10



CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research has been very helpful in identifying important trends regarding quality assurance and enhancement in higher education institutions such the most relevant of which are listed below:

- There is a strong desire for a high quality education among student organizations as 90% of the student organizations' representatives agree, that a high quality education is beneficial for Romania as for each student;
- The legislative framework is perceived by the organizations as an instrument that facilitates the establishment of a true partnership between the student organizations and the university;
- Over half of the organizations prepared three or more personal development sessions and social events for students in the academic year 2012-2013 contributing to the enhancement of the student experience;
- 32% of the respondent organizations committed themselves in writing a report on the compliance of the student's rights and obligations in the academic year 2013-2014.

However, there is an urgent need of improvement in the following areas:

- Most student organizations are not consulted considering the strategic plan of the university;

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- Over 90% of the student organizations' representatives agree that a high quality education is beneficial for Romania as for each student, yet approximately 15% of the student organizations did not include monitoring the quality of certain aspects of the educational process in their attributions; also 28% of the organizations do not assume the preparation of a report on the compliance of the students rights and regulations and 25% of the organizations didn't participate in any quality assurance meeting in the academic year 2012-2013; moreover only 3 organizations out of 43 were involved in the academic staff evaluation by the students; furthermore over half of the respondent organizations didn't organize any seminars on informing the students on the internal regulations of the university or organized only one such seminar in the academic year 2012-2013; the same proportion can be observed on the seminars informing the students representatives on their responsibilities;
 - There are rare cases where the student organization's independence is affected by the teachers' involvement or by the university staff as a result of the logistic and material aid provided;
 - The student organizations' representatives do not consider communication between organizations as important as the internal communication.

Considering these conclusions the following recommendations are appropriate:

- student organizations' representatives should realize that the communication between student organizations should be as important as the internal communication, as only through cooperation a true student community can be established;
- the independence of the student organizations is essential, in order to participate in the quality assurance and enhancement process that is why it must remain unaffected;
- student organizations should organize as many activities as possible covering the main aspects of quality assurance and enhancement, such as the compliance by the academic environment with students' rights and obligations;
- university representatives should consult all the respective student organizations when designing the strategic plan.

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