

External Evaluation Report

SIGMUS

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“Strengthening Student Role in Governance and Management at the Universities in Serbia”

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Introduction

This report provides an external evaluation of the promotion and dissemination activities of the *Strengthening Student Role in Governance and Management at the Universities in Serbia* (SIGMUS) project. The evaluation is based on a variety of input. The evaluator conducted a series of interviews with SIGMUS partners and work-package leaders. In addition, materials and the website have been analysed. Furthermore, the views of other stakeholders in the area of higher education in Serbia have been taken into account.

The objective of this external evaluation is to provide the SIGMUS partnership with an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the project activities so that these would be taken into account for any future activities.

The evaluator would like to thank all consortium partners for their open and constructive comments, which have been essential for the undertaking of the evaluation. In particular, the evaluator would like to thank the co-ordinator of the SIGMUS project for the facilitation of the whole process.

Overview

The SIGMUS project has been funded by the European Union through the Tempus IV project scheme as a project focussing on structural measures through governance reform. The project lasted from 2010 until 2013. It was co-ordinated by the University of Belgrade.

The project has been designed to address questions of student participation in university governance in universities in Serbia as one aspect of the implementation of the Bologna Process, which sets out to improve the student participation and to consider students as partners in higher education.

In addition to the core area of student participation, the project also aimed at improving the capacity of students to participate in university governance as well-informed actors. The anticipated side effect of this approach was also to improve the general implementation of the Bologna Process both at national and institutional level.

Partnership

The SIGMUS project featured 5 public and two private Serbian universities, four universities from the European Union, two student organisations from Serbia and one from the European Union as well as key organisations at national level. By choosing this wide-ranging partnership, the SIGMUS project has ensured a wide applicability of the outcomes of the project.

The inclusion of highly influential partners like the National Council for Higher Education also ensured that the outcomes of the project would reach a wide circle of actors who are instrumental in implementing suggestions and

recommendation stemming from the project. Thereby, both the impact of the project and the sustainability of the activities have been affected very positively.

Initially, there have been some differences in opinion between the two Serbian student organisations. But in the course of the project, these differences and associated problematic implications were overcome and solved, which in itself can already be considered as one of the positive outcomes of the project.

At the beginning of the SIGMUS project there was also some uncertainty about the impacts of the involvement of a larger number of students than in many other projects. However, this initial concern was to a very large extent unfounded and it has rather been assessed as very positive to have a very strong presence and responsibility of students.

A difficult aspect in a project of this length is of course connected to the fact that student organisations have a fairly fast turnover of their representatives. Normally, student representatives would not be in office for three years. But this potential problem was overcome by very well organised handover mechanisms, which ensured smooth transition between the different generations of student representatives.

It should also be noted that due to the fast turnover the students who were active in the SIGMUS project would not directly benefit from the outcomes and impact of the project themselves, as they would to a large extent not be students any longer. This could have been a negative factor for their motivation. But the students predominantly showed a great level of devotion and enthusiasm.

General perception

The SIGMUS project is widely known amongst the higher education community in Serbia, also beyond the scope of the partnership. This can indeed be considered as a highly positive feature, both in terms of the impact of the project and the sustainability of the activities undertaken.

There has been considerable interest on the subject, which also is a very positive feature, as too often topics such as the involvement of students are not of great interest within the higher education community (apart from the student community) and tend to be rather neglected in comparison with more technical aspects of structural reforms like for example qualification frameworks, credit systems or quality assurance despite the importance of the topic.

The SIGMUS project has been considered by all the partners but also by many externals as a very good project. This consideration is referring both to the topic of the project, but also to the actual undertaking of the project. It has been noted several times that the SIGMUS project is especially considered positively in comparison with other projects, both under the umbrella of the Tempus programme and other projects that took place in Serbia. Some partners had envisaged the project to be more problematic and therefore were positively surprised by how well it went.

The SIGMUS project also faced some opposition. Not everybody in universities is in favour of student participation or strengthening the role of students in university governance. These problems arose more at the local level and also only in relation to non-senior management or rather with ordinary university staff. But the SIGMUS project also helped changing the perception of the competence of students.

Activities and Objectives

The SIGMUS project consisted of a range of different activities under each work package. Most of these activities have been undertaken according to the envisaged timetable. Some delays were nevertheless unavoidable due to reasons outlined below. But despite the delays all activities that were initially foreseen were completed by the end of the project.

However, the activities within the SIGMUS project were possibly not always as wide-ranging as was initially hoped and envisaged, which nevertheless did not hamper the success of the SIGMUS project. This kind of difference between the ideal undertaking and the reality is not unusual in projects of this kind. Furthermore, it is rather considered as good practice to have very ambitious goals in order to achieve more than with just a minimum approach.

Because of the aforementioned initial differences in opinion and different views about the role of students and student organisations there have been some controversies also relating to the activities. Partners interpreted the underlying laws and regulations concerning student participation differently, which – at the beginning of the project – led to a situation where individual partners rather wanted to promote their own views and proposals instead of finding a common solution. However, in the course of the project this problem was less and less apparent and towards the end of the project there has been a wide consensus on many of the important aspects.

The work of the individual work packages went well. There have been some problems related to activities that took place during exam periods, as students would have to give priority to their study obligations. Therefore, it would be beneficial in any future project involving a large number of students to plan the activities carefully with the specificities of the “student calendar” in mind.

Within work package 1 all activities were successfully accomplished. It was seen as essential that comparative overviews regarding student participation in higher education governance in different was undertaken, as this highlighted the crucial elements of student participation whilst showing that there can be different ways of arranging it.

The survey on the state of student participation in Serbian universities yielded very important results and a return rate of 66% can be viewed as very successful. The findings of this survey have been widely communicated and disseminated also beyond the partnership of the SIGMUS project.

Within work package 2 different national legal regulations regarding student participation have been analysed in order to extract best practices that would be applicable in the Serbian context. It is envisaged that the findings of the SIGMUS project will be incorporated into a new law dealing with student participation and organisation. This is an aspect of the project, which has the potential of long lasting impact and ensuring the sustainability of the project.

Within work package 3 a range of activities took place that aimed at increasing capacity of student representatives. Within this work package the vast majority of work was therefore done only with students. The outcomes of these activities have been considered very positively. The visibility of the work of student organisations was increased, which has the side effect of ensuring greater accountability of their work as well as better linkage with the general student body.

The approach of training of trainers for specific competences and skills required by student representatives also ensured a good sustainability of these activities, which is fundamental given the quick turnover of student representatives and thereby avoiding that the positive impact would only affect one generation of student representatives.

Within work package 4 the activities undertaken were assessed very positively. Despite some delays with the questionnaires, the impact has been very positive and initial expectations have even been exceeded in parts, for example regarding the electronic version and the underlying software.

It was noted by everybody concerned that especially the summer school has had a very positive impact on the relations between the different student organisations, as differences were bridged. Given the positive effect of the summer school and the ensuing better activities, it would have been even more beneficial to arrange the summer school at an earlier stage, but this was not to be predicted.

Within work package 5 there have been delays caused by the turnover of the student representatives. But all envisaged outcomes have been achieved. It was assessed that it would have been more beneficial to plan the individual activities in more detail. For example, the need for some specific software could have been realised earlier, resulting in smoother implementation. The training of local student mentors has been very successful and useful to the support of student services at universities in Serbia.

Within work package 6 a committee in charge of quality control was established, which comprised both Serbian and EU partners. The committee held regular meetings and ensured that the project stayed on track and that solutions were quickly found for aspects, which had the potential to negatively impact the success of the SIGMUS project. It was considered very positively that students were also involved in this activity, as it provided the opportunity to assess the quality of the project from the viewpoint of the main beneficiary. But this approach also equipped students with competences, which are difficult to develop within their normal activities.

Impact and Sustainability

Within work package 7 it was ensured that the project would have effects, which exceed the lifetime of the project significantly. The SIGMUS project has already had some significant impacts. Further impact is to be in the future. It is especially worth noting that there has been influence on the national strategy for education, which will yield further impact. This has been to a large extent due to the involvement of specific partners such as the National Council for Higher Education, which reaffirms the benefits of the partnership of the SIGMUS project.

It was expressed by many that given the success of the project, it is very likely that student organisations will be closely involved in other projects in the area of higher education, which both strengthens the role of students but most likely also further projects, as the viewpoints of students usually add a very useful angle that cannot be covered by other stakeholders.

The approach to enhance competences of student representatives by using the train-the-trainers methodology ensures that the positive effects of the project will be maintained also after the project has ended.

The fact that the project was well known in the Serbian higher education community led to the fact that many others also started discussing issues on student participation. This side effect will also remain after the end of the project.

A major aspect of sustainability and impact is that the outcomes of the project will be strongly taken into account for a new law on student organising in Serbia, which by definition will have long-lasting implications.

Dissemination

As noted above the SIGMUS project has been widely known in the Serbian higher education community. This is not least connected to the different activities within work package 8. It should also be noted that the SIGMUS project is even taken into consideration in neighbouring countries, which is exceeding the envisaged national dissemination and impact.

A range of material to increase the visibility of the SIGMUS project has been produced. The material mainly consisted of leaflets and brochures for general information dissemination. Furthermore, posters and other promotional materials have been produced.

The materials are easily recognisable due to the brand image and logo used since the beginning of the project. They provide the information that would be expected to be contained in such material; i.e. the material provides a general overview of the project and the opportunities that exist for students and universities. For detailed information the reader is directed at the website, which provides further information.

However, given that only limited information can be provided on the materials directly, it might be worthwhile to reflect whether slightly more tailor-made materials could be developed. The type of information required by students and university management varies significantly. Therefore, the production of different materials for universities and students might allow for more targeted information dissemination.

There has been good co-operation with other higher education related projects in Serbia. Some events were jointly organised, which also ensured that the outcomes of the SIGMUS project were much more widely disseminated.

Several newspaper articles not only proved that the project was of general interest. It also provided the opportunity to reach out to wider audiences than the core higher education community.

The website of the SIGMUS project (<http://www.sigmus.edu.rs>) was run by the co-ordinating institution. It provides information about the SIGMUS project in general and also specific information about the different areas of work.

It is fairly easy to navigate the website and find the information one is looking for. The information provided is usually well readable and to the point. All essential information is up-to-date. However, much of the information is presented in a way that it suits all potential addressees of the website. As with the materials, it might have been useful to have specific sections devoted to the different target groups.

All documents that were produced within the framework of the SIGMUS project are on the website. In addition very useful further information, documents and research articles on the topic of student participation have been added. For the target audience in Serbia the documents are suitable and adequate. But for the international audience it would have been better to have all documents also available in English language. However, as the main audience is Serbian, this did not pose a big drawback.

It might have been a good idea to incorporate testimonials about lessons learned and from the SIGMUS project and positive features into the website, which might have had positive effects on people who are sceptical towards (increasing) student participation in higher education governance.

Management of the project

Generally, the management of the project by the University of Belgrade as part of work package 9 has been viewed and assessed as very professional and supportive to the aims and objectives of the project. This is to be seen as a very positive aspect especially given that it is the first project to be co-ordinated by the University, which previously had only been a partner in projects within the Tempus programme.

Concerns have nevertheless been expressed relating to management aspects, which to a large extent fall outside the scope of influence of the co-ordinator. In

particular some aspects relating to the financing have caused certain obstacles and partners expressed that there has not been sufficient support by the National Tempus Office to address problematic areas when they arose.

For example, there have been problems relating to the fact that most public universities are not integrated and the faculties are separate legal entities. Therefore, staff involved normally have only contractual relations with individual faculties, whereas Tempus rules would presume that staff is directly connected with the university, which is the official partner in a project from a legal point of view.

Also, the Tempus programme is not always designed in a way that envisages the inclusion of students or their organisations as active partners within projects, but typically they are rather foreseen as mere beneficiaries of a project.

Furthermore, problematic issues arose from differences of national rules and regulations and the European procedures to be used regarding Tempus projects. For example, the use of the exchange rate is regulated differently for Tempus projects than what the Serbian regulations on the use of exchange rates foresee. This is not a problem that is unique to this project but applies to all projects that are co-ordinated by a Serbian university. Given that it is new that a Serbian university is the grantholder of a Tempus project there have not been any model solutions, but it is very likely that these inconsistencies of regulations will be eradicated in the future with the support of the National Tempus Office, which did not have common instructions at hand for all the different issues.

It has also been noted that the accounting offices of the participating universities only had limited experience with international projects, which often slowed down financial procedures. There have for example been diverging views about whether original invoices should be kept by the co-ordinator or the individual partners, as typically the financial departments of each partner would refrain from letting go of originals.

Project partners and the management assessed that a lot of working time had to be spend on dealing with these issues. Hence it was felt that too much time was taken up by administrative issues instead of devoting this time to the actual content of the project.

Lastly, it should be noted that the project helped improve the perception of the competences of students, which most likely will be reflected in strengthened student participation in university governance, especially related to aspects which are often believed to be outside the competences of students.

Conclusion

The SIGMUS project can be considered a well-planned and successfully implemented project. Minor drawbacks in projects of this scale are almost unavoidable, but they never posed major obstacles to the aims and objectives of the project.

The SIGMUS project contributed well to the implementation of the Bologna Process and the underlying value of student participation within the European Higher Education Area.

The differences between the student organisations were diminished, which led to students being able to have a stronger impact, as they rather speak with one voice, as even noticed by the Minister of Education. This is crucial in order to influence decisions in such a way that the interest of students is better taken into account.

The SIGMUS project has strongly contributed to a changing of perspective of viewing students as competent partners in higher education governance.

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