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Call for contributions: Paper submission form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Proposal

Title: A METHODOLOGY FOR PERPETUALLY ENHANCING STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES AND BASED ON STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Abstract (150 words max):

The growing importance for entrepreneurial, student-centred, engaged universities that empower graduates with knowledge, 21st century competencies and skills but also with personal attributes which will prepare them for their future career and role as active citizens has led to an increasing pressure for HEIs to place a greater emphasis on graduate employability. To ensure student employability and through that drive societal change, universities need to identify and implement ways to respond to the ever-changing needs and expectations of students and the labor market and thus society in general.

This paper presents a methodology for enhancing student employability through engaging the IQA processes in a way that perpetual feedback and evaluation from students, the labor market and the academics is used to inform the academic curriculum and Learning Environment. The methodology has been used by our university, and it is proposed in the content of sharing best practices.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere?   NO

Text of paper (3000 words max):

A METHODOLOGY FOR PERPETUALLY ENHANCING STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES AND BASED ON STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

A.   INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Drastic changes are constantly taking place in the Higher Education (HE) ecosystem. Universities are nowadays expected to have a greater economic, social, and cultural impact (ACEEU, 2016). Furthermore, transnational policies and numerous publications (Bologna Declaration, EUA, 2013; World Bank, 2017; EC, 2012; Allen and Weert, 2007; Martin, 2018) emphasize employability as a fundamental goal of HE and a tool for achieving the above. Employability is also a major concern for both students and the labor market, as key stakeholders in HE, and identifying and meeting their needs is of vital importance to HEIs. This is profoundly emphasized in numerous publications (see Alves et al. 2010, Diamond, 2008, ENQA, 2018; Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in in the European Higher Education Area-ESG, 2015; Beerkens & Udam 2017, Kettunen, 2014, Becket & Brooks, 2006; Hopbach, 2014; Beerkens & Udam, 2017).

This paper presents a methodology, developed and implemented by our university, in which students, industry actors, and academics are engaged in the internal quality assurance processes for effectively improving student employability and for fostering societal change through enhancing and measuring the 21st century students' knowledge, skills and competencies.

B. METHODOLOGY FOR PERPETUALLY ENHANCING STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

The framework developed and implemented at the UNIC, focuses on the enhancement of student employability based on a 3-STEP approach: (a) Target Setting, (b) Plan of Action, and (c) Evaluation & Re-Visiting of Target Setting.

The details of the Framework developed is presented below:
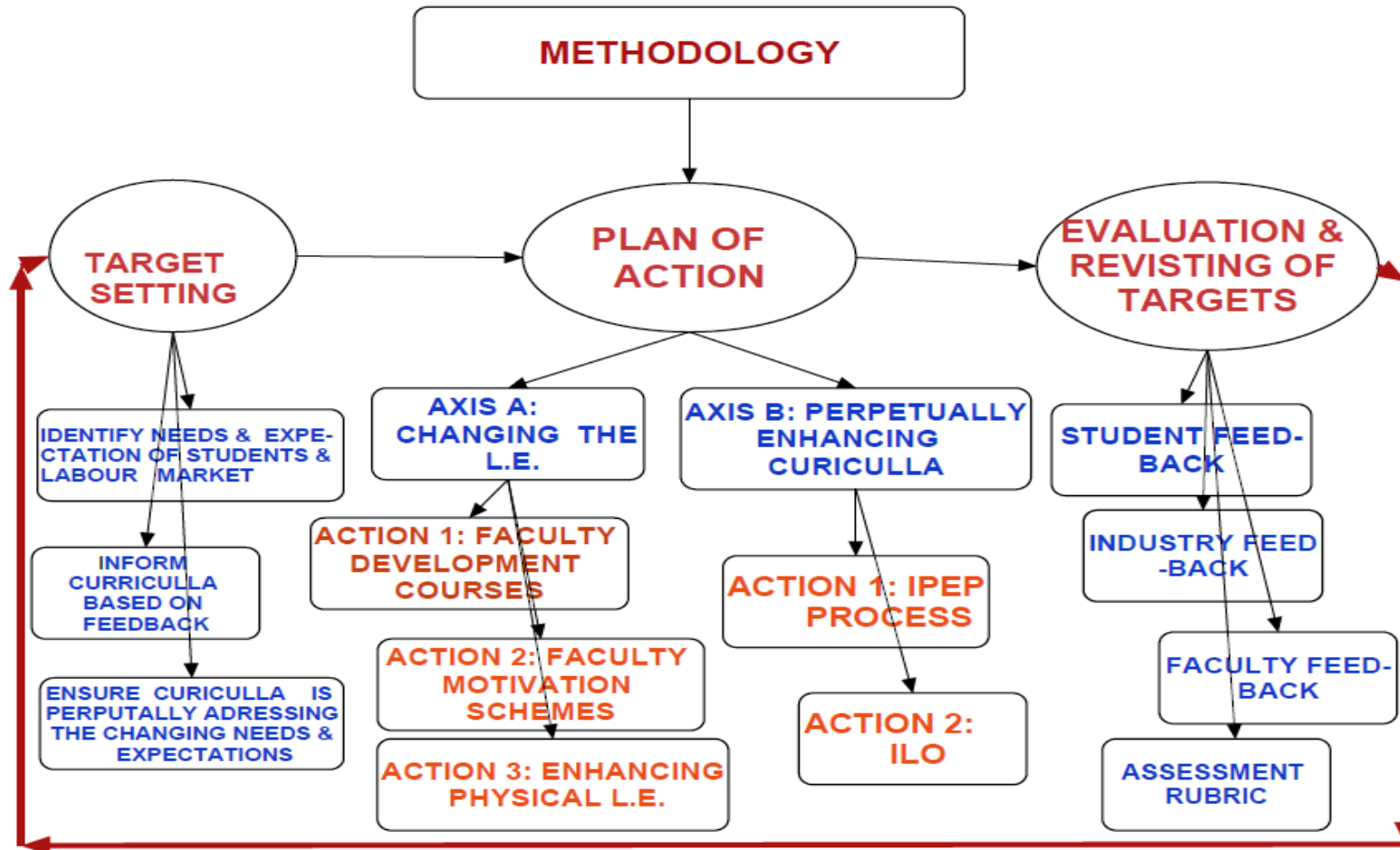
C. THE METHODOLOGY EXPLAINED

STEP 1: TARGET SETTING

The first step involves the identification of the targets that need to be met through this methodology. Our objective was the perpetual enhancement of student employability through the engagement of the internal quality processes. To achieve this, and based on discussions at senior management level, the following targets were set : (i) the needs and expectations of the students and the labor market with respect to the skills, competencies and attributes profile of students needed by the industry, and society in general, had to be identified, (ii) the curricula, the LO, and the learning environment need to be informed so as to reflect these needs and expectations, and (iii) the above need to be addressed through an ongoing process, as those needs and expectations are constantly changing.

These targets were communicated to all relevant parties (Deans, Heads of Pedagogical Units, IQAC, etc).

STEP 2: PLAN OF ACTION

To reach our target, a plan of action was needed, which basically addresses the question of how to reach the targets set. Specifically we had to decide the following: (i) how to identify the needs and expectations of academics, of current and past students, and of prospective employers with respect to the employability of students and the societal goals to be achieved, (ii) how to translate stakeholders' needs & expectations into graduate competencies and attributes profile, which in turn should then be translated into curricula, learning outcomes and learning environment, and (iii) how to inform curricula and the learning process and learning environment accordingly.

As shown in Diagram 1 above, our plan of action evolved around two axes: (A) Changing the Learning Environment, and (B) perpetually enhancing the Curricula based on feedback.

AXIS A: Changing the Learning Environment
Addressing the matter of changing the learning environment involved the following 3 actions:

Action 1: Professional Development courses

Clearly the needs of the 21st century learner differ greatly from the ones of previous centuries and education should emphasize high-level operational knowledge, competencies and personality qualities. To achieve this Fadel et. al (2015) propose a well-known framework which is referred to as the 21st century skills framework (CCR). As suggested by the CCR Model for 21st Century Learner, illustrated below in Diagram 2, in the 21st Century classroom, students' expected characteristics, skills and knowledge, differ greatly from the traditional educational model.
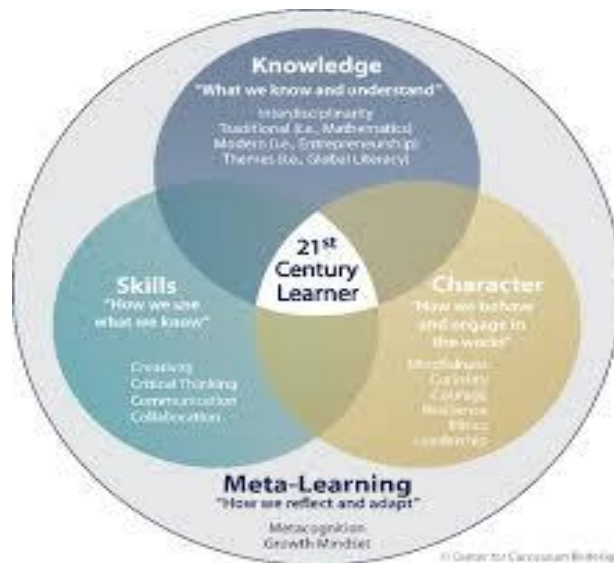
Diagram 2: CCR Model for 21st Century Learner (Fadel, C., Bialik M. & Trilling, B., 2015)

For creating the students and academics of the 21st Century, the University of Nicosia developed through its Pedagogical Support Unit (PSU) and Distance Learning Pedagogical Support Unit (ePSU) a 36-hour Professional Development Training Workshop which is offered to all Academic and Teaching staff.

The Training includes the Following workshops:

Week 1: Developing Learners' 21st century skills
Week 2: Cognitive and neuroscience research: Implications for education and learning
Week 3: Developing effective learning environments
Week 4: Including students with diverse needs in a university classroom
Week 5: Project and Problem Based Learning
Week 6: Developing a course with critical and creative focus
Week 7: Measuring learning outcomes using Authentic Assessment, assignments, quizzes, tests and rubrics in online and face-to-face courses
Week 8: Online education: Technology Enhanced Learning and Learning Analytics
Week 9: Using interactive and collaborative tools in online learning
Week 10: Using video and multimedia in an online course
Week 11: Accommodating adult learners' characteristics and needs in an online course.
Week 12**:** Developing and teaching an online course: Reflections and best practices.

The main aim of the professional development training courses is to empower teaching faculty with the tools needed to address the needs of the 21st century learner.

Action 2: *Faculty Motivation schemes*

Recognizing the high value of teaching and learning, the UNIC introduced the 'Excellence in Teaching Award' with the aim of further motivating academics to prepare themselves in addressing the 21st century classroom needs. This award is granted based on the following criteria: connection of research and teaching, the use of Project/ Problem- Based learning, introducing of ICTs, effectiveness of learning, authentic assessment, measuring learning effectiveness, and updating of the curricula.

Action 3: Enhancing Physical Infrastructure of the Learning Environment

Acknowledging the importance of the physical infrastructure of the learning environment (LE), the university is in the process of changing the physical learning environment characteristics in a manner that it will support the effectiveness of learning.

AXIS B: Perpetual Curriculum Enhancement

Addressing the matter of the perpetual enhancement of the academic curriculum involved the following 2 actions: The Internal Programme Evaluation Process (Action 1), and the establishment of the University Labor Market Liaison Office (Action 2).

ACTION 1: The Internal Programme Evaluation Process (IPEP) as a tool for Re-engineering the programmes of study

IPEP is a process developed and used at the UNIC for the development and/or re-engineering of programmes of study. This process is based on feedback from internal and external academics, students, and industry experts. The feedback is used for re-visiting the course/module syllabi and LO's, the learning and assessment material, the human and physical infrastructure, etc., so that programmes would be perpetually improved in a manner that addresses the ever-changing needs and expectations of the labor market, society and of the graduates.

The IPEP process is carried out at a departmental level (by the Head of Department/Programme Coordinator) and it is repeated every 4 years. The feedback received is integrated with the results of the self-evaluation of the programme to identify improvements needed. As an outcome of the recent IPEP exercise UNIC identified a pressing need to enhance its programmes of study by incorporating practicum/placement in the curricula and a Senate decision was made to proceed in that direction.

As a result of the above, UNIC had to identify ways for placing students in the work environment in a manner that would address the targets set.

ACTION 2: The UNIC Labor Market Liaison Office (ILO)

The ILOs were developed within the framework of the project "Development and Operation of Industry Liaison Offices at the Universities operating in the Republic of Cyprus". The project was initiated as part of the Operational Program "Employment, Human Resources and Social Cohesion" of the 2014-2020 Programming Period, which is funded by the European Union's Structural Funds and from national funds with an amount of € 7,1 million. The project invites all Universities operating in the Republic of Cyprus (Public and Private) to participate with the aim of enhancing graduate employability and social cohesion.

Within the frame of this project and in line with its targets and plan of action, UNIC established its ILO and proceeded in strengthening and supporting the collaboration between HEIs and the industry actors and society in general. Through the operations of the ILO the needs and expectations of students and society with regards to employability would be identified, and the curricula and learning environment would be informed accordingly through the quality assurance processes of the university. The underlying aim is that student employability would be enhanced, the needs and of the market would be met, and university societal engagement would be improved.

To meet the requirements of the project and achieve its targets, the ILO of the University of Nicosia utilized the following approach:

a) Proceeded in building bridges with the labor market actors and identifying their needs and expectations for student skills, competencies and general profile/attributes.

b) Informed students of the need for and the value of placement and made every effort to convince them that this would be a valuable tool for enhancing their employability and career.

c) Proceeded in identifying student skills, competencies and general personal attributes through interviews with students and examination of their CV's.

d) Met with Heads of Departments and/or Programme Coordinators to (i) discuss the findings from (a) and (c) above in order to identify if there was a need to complement the curricula so as to address the needs and expectations of the 21st century labor market, and (ii) identify ways to integrate work placement in as many programmes of study as possible.

e) Secured work placement opportunities for students by entering into agreements with the labor market players for professions relating to the programmes of study where placement/internship was added into the curricula.

f) Announced to students the availability of work placement as part of their academic path through a call for an expression of interested in an internship.

g) Using a shared web portal and data base, proceeded in recording: (i) information relating to the students that expressed an interest for an internship (programme of study, skills and competencies, other work experience, general information, etc.), and (ii) the industry placement opportunities and specifically the subject area, host organization, specific labor market requirements from students (skills, competencies, general profile).

h) Matched student profiles with labor market requirements and proceeded with student placement arrangements.

i) Monitored student progress while in their placement and handled all communication with host organization and collaborated with the student's academic supervisor.

The QA processes involved include, among others, the engagement of the academicians for the development of the module and its ECTS, of the LO's, the assessment methods, the assessment of the students' performance by the host organization, the assessment of the student by the academics, monitoring of the placement, keeping of log book by students, submitting a self-reflection essay, etc.

STEP 3: EVALUATION & RE-VISITING OF TARGET SETTING

The last Step involves data collection, analysis and summarizing of findings, comparison against expected targets for determining if the objectives are met, and identifying any adjustments needed so that a new cycle will begin. We thus must obtain feedback from all involved and based on it re-visit the TARGET and revise it, as necessary, in a continuous loop. This loop is what the authors consider making this methodology stand out.

As part of the Methodology, feedback is solicited from (a) students, (b) labor market, and (c) academics:
- At the end of the placement, students evaluate the utility of the placement from the viewpoint of academic values pertinent to their programme of study and with respect to the value of the placement in relation to their future employability.
- The host organization provides feedback on student's performance on various skills & competencies, knowledge and general attributes as well as on any mismatch identified, with respect to their expectations.
- The academics are provided with the feedback received from students and the industry actors so that they can identify any mismatches that need to be addressed.

Furthermore, the PSU and the e-PSU of the University of Nicosia are currently collaborating with academics for developing assessment rubrics as tools for evaluating students' 21st century skills so that areas of strengths and weaknesses would be identified. The Rubrics are now in the validation stage.

The feedback received from the students and the host organizations, the results of the students' 21st century skills assessment (when available), input from academics upon completion of the Pedagogical Development Training and teaching, as well as from their experience with student placement, forms the basis for re-visiting the Targets set, closing thus the loop.

D. CONCLUSSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper presents a methodology for enhancing student employability, and driving thus societal change, through engaging the IQA process in a way that perpetual feedback and evaluation from students, the labor market and the academic is used to inform the academic curriculum and the learning environment.

The methodology involves engaging the key stakeholders of HEIs in their quality assurance processes and identifying and meeting their continuously changing needs and expectations for employability. The underlying assumptions behind the methodology is that HE and graduate employability are interconnected and that employability concerns should drive innovations in course design and delivery.

A unique aspect of this methodology is that feedback would be continuously received from students and industry actors and it should be perpetually communicated to the academics. Through the quality assurances processes the academics can then revisit the programme curriculum, the LOs and LE and revise them in a way that students' employability profile is improved, and the future needs of employers are satisfied, adding thus value to society.

Our experience has shown a need to add work placement in the curricula and feedback received from key stakeholders validates the value of the placement as a tool for enhancing employability but also for perpetually enhancing the curricula in a manner that would also drive social change.

The value of this methodology, which we propose in the content of sharing best practices, is documented by:

    (a) The very positive feedback received so far both from students and labor market, especially for the impact in enhancing students' skills, competencies and personality traits.

    (b) The input from academics for the usefulness of the pedagogical training received, and of the feedback received form students and industry actors resulting from the placement, as a tool for re-examining teaching and learning in a manner that would address the 21st century learner needs.

    (c) The resulting re-visiting of curricula, LO's and LE, based on the feedback received from student placements and from the professional training, in a manner that continuously addresses the needs and expectations of key HE stakeholders: students, industry and society in general, and academia.

    (d) The increase in the interest expressed by students for placements.

Through this methodology we anticipate that not only the employability of students would be improved, but also students will be equipped with competencies, skills and personality traits needed by the citizens of the 21st century. Universities would also be more engaged and contribute in addressing the SDGs. Results have of course to be measured and monitored for this methodology to be affective. As with any change, challenges had to be faced, such as the reluctance by academics for changing the curricula and the rigid National QA system that does not allow for fast changes if those are considered significant. The commitment of the University in the employability of students and the resulting societal changes, as well as the eagerness of students and the labor market actors for providing feedback based on which universities would improve/enhance curricula, Los, and students' skills and competencies so that to improve employability, will serve as success factors in the implementation of this methodology.

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ABBREVIATIONS

HE: Higher Education
QA: Quality Assurance
IQA: Internal Quality Assurance
ILO: Industry Liaison Office
IPEP: Internal Programme Evaluation Process
IIEP: International Institute for Educational Planning
LO's: Learning Outcomes
PSU: Pedagogical Support Unit
ePSU: e-Learning Pedagogical Support Unit

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 22 July 2019 to eqaf@eua.eu*. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do* not *send a hard copy or a PDF file.*