



**EUA (European University Association)
Institutional Evaluation Programme**

COMENIUS UNIVERSITY BRATISLAVA

EUA EVALUATION REPORT

September 2006

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1. Introduction

The evaluation of Comenius University took place in the context of evaluations of 22 other higher education institutions in Slovakia and in the wider context of:

- The Slovak government's strategic objective of placing Slovakia in a favourable position in meeting the Lisbon objectives;
- The Slovak government's interest in ensuring the successful implementation of the Bologna reforms;
- The Slovak government's acknowledgement of the need to increase the transparency and the attractiveness of the Slovak higher education sector for the public

The intention of this evaluation exercise is to support Slovak higher education institutions in their continuing development in order to meet best standards and practices that are adapted to their specific context. This exercise will include the evaluation of all Slovak higher education institutions and a review of the research capacity at the national level. The national report will be based on the conclusions of the 23 institutional evaluations and on a system review of research capacity.

The review of 23 Slovak higher education institutions is taking place in a coordinated manner during the academic years 2005/2006 and 2006/2007, using the EUA institutional review methodology and guidelines which have been successfully applied in institutional reviews of some 150 universities in some 36 countries over the past 12 years. These guidelines have been fine-tuned to meet the specific requirements of the Slovak system while maintaining the principle that the Institutional Evaluation Programme primarily is a membership service providing advice to the university. The process is designed to ensure that each individual university, the university system as a whole, and its stakeholders gain maximum benefit from comprehensive reviews by teams of experienced international quality assurance experts. This methodology also ensures that the procedures and processes in place in Slovak higher education institutions are reviewed against best practice internationally.

The team was aware of the fact that Comenius University had undergone an institutional evaluation of a similar kind in 1997 under the auspices of the then CRE. However, while the team took note of this, the present evaluation was not primarily designed as a follow-up but rather as a new evaluation since it needed to be embedded into the context of the Slovak system evaluation.

Following the formal request from the Rector of Comenius University, the Steering Committee of the EUA institutional review programme appointed a team for the evaluation of Comenius University.

This team was composed of:

- Jürgen Kohler, Professor of Law and former Rector, University of Greifswald, Germany and President of the German Accreditation Council, as chair;
- Kenneth Edwards, Cambridge University and former Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester, United Kingdom;
- Kerstin Noren, Vice-Rector, Gothenberg University, Sweden;
- Pdraig Walsh, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board, Dublin, Ireland, as secretary.

The team came to Comenius University for a preliminary visit from 22 to 24 March 2006 and for the main visit from 27 to 30 June 2006.

The review team met the Rector, the team of Vice-Rectors; representatives from the University Academic Senate and University Scientific Board; Deans of Faculties, staff and students of many faculties and a number of administrative staff; and representatives of external stakeholders from business, industry and the community of Bratislava (in the form of the Board of Trustees)

The team also had special meetings with a number of Faculty Scientific Boards, with doctoral students and with groups of Faculty Vice-Deans responsible for Study and Research.

2. Process

The methodology of the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme is guided by four central strategic questions.

- What is the university trying to do?
- How is the university trying to do it?
- How does the university know that it works?
- How does the university change in order to improve?

The EUA team used these questions as its framework when conducting the evaluation of Comenius University.

The process for the review of Comenius University started after the preparatory seminar for all Slovak higher education institutions on 14 September 2005. Following the EUA Institutional Evaluation Panel annual induction seminar in Leuven in October 2005, the date of the first visit was set. Comenius University then appointed a self-evaluation steering committee, as requested in the EUA guidelines. The self-evaluation steering committee was appointed by the rector and consisted of nominees from the deans of the faculties and the academic senate and scientific board of the university. The committee was chaired by the vice-rector for university development. The final draft of the Comenius University self-evaluation report (SER) was approved in January 2006, and received in good time by the EUA team before its preliminary site visit in March 2006.

The SER was comprehensive and provided details on the organisational structure of the university, its financing, its management and its methods of study and research. The SER also contained a useful SWOT analysis. The report concluded with details of the university's planning and development.

During the EUA team's visits, discussions were fruitful and were conducted in a very transparent way. The university was well prepared for the review visits, with the background to the team's presence and tasks well explained. The process at Comenius University was well prepared and well organised. Discussions at Comenius University showed strong commitment and open-mindedness of university members, impressive support by the external stakeholders the team met, and conveyed a strong sense of high potential as a key institution in the Slovak higher education system with international aspirations.

The EUA review team would like to thank the Rector of Comenius University, Prof. František Gaher and all the staff, students and external stakeholders for their warm welcome and for many helpful and open discussions during the preliminary and main review visits. The team especially wishes to thank Prof. Ivan Ostrovsky, vice-rector for university development, and his staff for their untiring interest and support and great efficiency in liaising with the EUA team.

Limitations of the process

There are some limitations in this form of assessment. In the amount of time available to the review team, it was simply not possible to drill down in the form of an audit trail. The report of the review team is dependent on what they have been told during the visit. In some cases, the review team received different answers to the same questions from different people. It is also not possible during the review visit to perform a quantitative evaluation of research performance.

3. Comenius University Profile

Comenius University is the oldest higher education institution in Slovakia. It is a classic, national comprehensive university. The university is organised into 13 faculties and does not have a central campus. The faculties are distributed not only throughout Bratislava but also outside the city.

Comenius University has over 18% of the total number of third-level students in Slovakia, including over 26% of the country's PhD students. In several fields of study, the university is the only institution providing higher education in the country. Although the proportion of overseas students in Slovakia is low by western European standards (<1%), over 40% of these are enrolled in Comenius University.

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY TRYING TO DO?

4. Mission and vision

The EUA methodology uses the university's mission and vision as starting points in reviewing what the university is trying to do. The SER states that the aim of Comenius University is to maintain and develop its status as a classical university. It does not limit its professors and other academic employees in the selection of their research priorities or in determining the objects of their research. As a national university, however, Comenius University feels a responsibility to preserve and develop research and university education in areas that protect and develop the national heritage and culture of Slovakia. Examples are Slovak language and culture, ethnology and ethnography, archaeology, Slovak history and Slovak studies, the natural environment of Slovakia, its protection and sources and the like.

During the course of the two review visits, it was evident to the review team that Comenius University has identified 3 prime objectives by which it seeks to develop its mission and vision.

- To be a research university; a place of excellence, an international player, a national champion, to be internationally competitive with a mission to achieve that end
- To be a university that has adopted the European (Bologna) study model
- To maintain a broad, knowledge base befitting its status as the largest, comprehensive university in Slovakia and as the protector of a number of small subjects of national importance

5. Constraints

Before looking at the means by which the university tries to achieve its vision and mission, it is helpful to put its ability to do this in context and to outline the limits of its autonomy and identify any constraints that inhibit or restrict the university's ability to translate its mission and vision into study and research programmes. These constraints are not untypical for the period following the social changes in 1989 which have brought about considerable changes in the higher education landscape in Slovakia and indeed within the wider Europe.

There has been a mushrooming of higher education institutions in Slovakia and the attendant development of a higher education 'marketplace' with more 'competitors' competing for fewer 'customers'. The overall level of funding for higher education in Slovakia is low, by western European standards. The Slovak government has a declared policy of wishing to strategically focus on research, and indeed there appears to be progress in doing so. This creates challenges for institutions in terms of how to prioritise.

The environment for higher education in Slovakia is one with heavy and prescriptive legislation ('overcomplicated national legislation for universities', as the SER terms it) at a time when universities require greater autonomy, so as to be able to take the long-term perspective to achieve high quality in education and research. Indeed, the importance of university autonomy as a fundamental principle of quality assurance has been recognised by the ministers for higher education in the European Higher Education Area (of which Slovakia is a member) when they adopted the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*¹ in Bergen in 2005.

In the opinion of the review team, an overly prescriptive, externally-imposed, university organisational structure allied with a system of externally-defined study fields can promote conditions of ossification and stifle innovation.

The accreditation methodology in Slovakia is focussed on educational inputs which can lead to the development of programmes based on compliance (or the dangers of a 'tick-box' system). The system of academic guarantors leads to a compliance, input-defined approach to standards and quality. Such a system is inconsistent with the Bologna process and its focus on learning outcomes. As such, the implementation of the Bologna reforms is unclear and faulty. For instance, there seems to be little effort to fulfil the criteria of the first (Bachelor) degree providing entry to the labour market or on the relation between the accreditation process and the Bologna requirement to develop a national qualifications framework based on defined competences along the lines of the so-called Dublin descriptors.

HOW IS THE UNIVERSITY TRYING TO DO IT?

6. Building a common sense of purpose

Commonly, an organisation can try to achieve its mission and vision by:

- Identifying a series of objectives or goals
- Putting in place a plan to achieve these objectives or goals
- Creating activities that fulfil the objectives

- Putting in place structures and processes through which to achieve these activities

In order to achieve its objectives, an organisation must attempt to build a common sense of purpose. However, in an organisation such as a university, which enshrines the concept of academic freedom in the form of the freedom to challenge or to hold unpopular or contrary opinions, it is not unusual to have a mixture of voices.

During the course of the two visits, it was clear to the review team that there is a healthy internal debate between the desirability for a more integrated university and the maintenance of strong faculty autonomy. As such, the team met with what could be described as an ‘ambiguity of sentiments’ between these competing desires. This ‘ambiguity of sentiments’ can lead to the impression of a defensive mood in certain places within the university.

On the one hand, there is recognition of the weaknesses of a strong faculty system, such as the inefficiency of programmes and subjects leading to duplication of effort in terms of programmes and differences in the quality of individual faculties.

On the other hand, there are voices indicating the strengths of faculty autonomy, the system of institutional evaluation of faculties and voices extolling the virtue of the conservatism and persistence of the university and of an institutional stability which protects the university against adventurism. In parts of the SER and during the visit, this came across as a fear of inappropriate interventionism. In these cases, the ‘integrated’ university is seen to more of a threat than an opportunity.

On the one hand, there is a call for democratic participation and fear of inappropriate interference while on the other there is a rising awareness of the need for professionalism in order to facilitate speedy adjustments and to ensure making best use of new opportunities. These different sentiments are, to some extent and in some cases, reflected in modes of thinking which focus on institutional structures rather than on cross-institutional challenges and projects.

What is desirable is the correct balance of bottom-up and top-down approaches to the setting of vision, goals and priorities. This should permit the development of an integrated university that preserves appropriate decentralisation consistent with an appropriate degree of subsidiarity, which permits decision making at the most appropriate, lowest level.

The review team came across a sense of a phase of transition in the university but of a transition which is moving at different speeds in different parts of the university. To this extent, it was not surprising that the sentiments across the university are not unified.

7. Fulfilling Mission and Vision

The translation of a modern university’s mission and vision into activities such as teaching and research programmes is commonly articulated in a public, strategic development plan.

The closest approximation to a strategic plan for Comenius University is expressed in one of the appendices of the SER which details the long-range development plan of the university for 2004-2008. Although the plan purports to have hierarchically arranged the areas in which the university will concentrate in the forthcoming future, it was not clear to the review team that this was so. The

development plan appeared to have been written in the form of a long list of objectives. These objectives are given in the form of activities or desirable activities. A strategic plan is not, however, the same as a list of objectives.

Following the preliminary visit, the review team requested and were provided with long-term development plans for two of the faculties of the university. Again, while these documents contained clear missions and SWOT analyses, the development plans also contained lists of non-prioritised objectives. While the objectives were adumbrated later in the document, there was not a clear translation of objectives into a concrete plan consisting of a series of prioritised actions which could be implemented, monitored and measured.

With such a large number of objectives, there is a need for prioritisation. In the SER, the university recognises that it requires special support for its scientific research development, its desire to have official inclusion among the nation's 'research universities' and wishes to have intensive involvement in the European Research Area. No more than any other European university wishing to follow this path, it is necessary that Comenius University recognises the need for prioritisation in the area of research.

Following the list of primary objectives in the aforementioned long-term development plan for the university, there are a series of secondary activities, which are not, in themselves, actions. In the opinion of the review team, what is fundamentally required is the translation of these objectives and desirable activities into a strategic plan based on *priorities*, which leads to an *action plan* with timelines and deliverables. One of the goals is to find for these objectives a number of primary tools which are fit for strategic planning at the level of process.

It was clear to the review team during the course of the visits that there are the indications of a strategic approach in parts of the university. In some faculties, there is a developing recognition of the need for some prioritisation, particularly in the area of research. In these cases, it was clear that disciplinary barriers can be and are being broken down.

During the course of the two visits, the review team came across lots of good ideas in different faculties. A major challenge is to find the most appropriate means to cross-fertilise and disseminate these good practices across the institution as a whole.

A strategic plan (also cf. item 15 below) for Comenius University should primarily cover three major fields of objectives; i.e. (1) ensuring research excellence as a national champion and based on international competitiveness, (2) introducing the European study model by fully addressing the Bologna Process issues; and (3) maintaining a broad knowledge base bearing in mind that Comenius University is expected to maintain certain singular subjects which are seen as part of the national heritage. These objectives should be pursued in the context of ensuring (a) institutional fitness for strategic planning, (b) embracing the potential of interdisciplinarity, (c) providing adequate internal funding and staffing policies, and (d) provision of a systematic and comprehensive quality assurance system. It is imperative, however, that these aspects be translated into concrete priorities and action lines. In doing so, there may eventually be a need to address the level and mode of university integration while preserving the optimum level of decentralisation, and so governance, organisation, and university processes need to be reconsidered.

8. Study programmes and the Bologna process

An objective of the university development plan is to effectively transform the existing study courses and to introduce the system of academic programmes, in line with the law and the current education trends, in what the SER terms the European study model. The university indicated, however that it does not have any individual formal statement or document about the acceptance and implementation of the Bologna process.

It was clear from discussions in the various faculties with both students and academic staff that the study programme reform is incomplete, consisting largely of a mechanical restructuring of the former 5 year programmes into a 3 year Bachelor + a 2-year Masters system.

Embracing the Bologna reforms must include a full embracing of the learning outcomes and competences approach rather than an input-based, prescribed curricular approach. The role of soft skills must also be embraced.

There are also particular challenges and opportunities in programme restructuring. One of the challenges which must be addressed comprehensively is the issue of employability for graduates with the first degree. None of the students interviewed indicated a desire to enter the labour market after the first degree. This is also a challenge for Slovak legislators in that, in some cases, students with Bachelors degrees would not be certified to work in certain fields. Progress in this area must involve more dialogue with external stakeholders. There was evidence during the review visits of some faculties coming to terms with the utility of the Bachelors degree, in terms of, for instance, bringing nurse education from the apprentice-based model into university and also in terms of some of the programmes operated by the Faculty of Physics, Mathematics and Informatics.

The proper application of the ECTS system, with appropriate recognition, is also necessary, if the benefits of the Bologna process, such as improved mobility, are to flow.

The university also needs to grapple with the concept of student workload rather than a prescribed number of hours of instruction.

The development of joint programmes between faculties must go beyond the mere sharing of electives. There must be a sense of real joint ownership of programmes between faculties. It has to be more than a 'we run/you run, you/we can buy in' process. The 2-cycle Bologna process offers the university new opportunities to further genuine interfaculty collaboration in the development of new interdisciplinary Masters programmes. There is also the opportunity to eliminate some of the duplication (acknowledged in the SER) whereby programmes in the same discipline are offered by different faculties.

Opportunities may also be presented by the restructuring of academic programmes. There are opportunities for innovation around the interfaces between the bachelors and masters programmes. There may also be missed opportunities in the area of life-long learning.

9. Research

The data provided in the SER indicate confirms that Comenius University belongs among the most significant scientific and research institutions in Slovakia. The university receives about 20% of the

state research grants awarded and contributes about 30% of the national research output from higher education institutions.

The declaration that the university does not limit its professors in the selection of their research priorities or determining the objects of their research is not inconsistent with the need for the university to focus on key areas and to prioritise its research.

The university needs to grasp the opportunities for interdisciplinary research, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences. There should be a paralleling of research and teaching activities, particularly at the Masters/PhD level.

The SER identifies the importance of increasing the proportion of its teaching staff qualified to PhD level from the current level of 66%. The university has also identified the problem of the average age of professors in the university, which is currently at 62 years of age. This, however, presents the university with an opportunity in the future to have a focussed recruitment of staff in key research areas rather than merely replacing the retiring professor in the same field. Indeed, the review team came across this practice in some faculties already.

The university has correctly identified the need to win more research funding from the European Union. In order to be successful in this, proper administrative supports need to be put in place to assist in the submission of research grant proposals.

The university also needs to participate more fully in research exchange schemes so as to expose researchers to environments other than that of Comenius University. In discussions with doctoral students across all the faculties of the university, all students had undertaken their undergraduate studies at the university and only one had spent part of the doctoral programme in a university outside the country.

The review team came across pockets of good practice in some faculties, where clearly there was evidence of collaboration between different departments, attempts to generate critical mass in research and targeted recruitment of new research staff in identified prioritised areas.

A member of a faculty scientific board highlighted the reality that the university policy of all employees having a free choice to select the field of research or scientific problem as a subject of solution being fine in the 'old days' when there was no research money to go around but is not compatible with the espoused aim of developing Comenius university into an institution of trans-regional, national and international significance with a research character. Comenius University should therefore explore how, and in which fields, to be more focussed on research excellence, and how to align parallel study programmes.

10. Financing and revenue streams

Given that the Higher Education law 2002 prohibits the university from charging a tuition fee for students attending study programmes at the first, second and full-time PhD level, the university must grow its revenue streams from other activities. Indeed, the university development plan identifies a requirement for a considerable increase of activities in the field of project activities towards gaining non-budgetary resources, particularly from European resources and also that, over time, the issue of alumni support will have to become more important.

The university needs to obtain more diverse sources for income, to explore strategies for private contract money. There is a need for strategic support structures (including dedicated administrative staff) for staff applying for EU grants, to simplify the process.

The university has no policy on intellectual property protection and does not monitor the patent protection of those university results that are protected by patents.

The team appreciates that Comenius University operates a performance-related scheme for allocating funds internally. This approach can be used as a driver for initiatives. There may be scope for improvement but the team could not explore the details of the scheme to such an extent that it could advise in detail.

11. University administration

In the SER, Comenius University recognises the following as major weakness of the university: (a) the administrative load on academic employees; (b) the inadequate efficiency of using human resources; (c) the low professionalisation of the academic management of the universities and its faculties. Additionally the SER recognises that a system of further professional education is missing with respect to the administrative staff. Training for administrative staff is carried out on an actual needs basis and seems to be confined to IT and legislative training.

The non-academic university staff do not operate at the level that would be expected within industry and commerce. They would appear to act as clerks, involved in the provision of information but not in decision making, whereby an excessive administrative burden falls on academic staff. It was clear from discussions with administrative staff that some of them saw their primary role as making sure that the academic heads did not do anything illegal! Others were clearly disenchanted with their status and did not feel valued for their professional expertise. There is a necessity to integrate the capacity of the administrative staff and to raise their motivation.

The successful development of a modern, well-functioning university requires a professional administration. The administrative staff must be valued and senior staff must feel that they have an input into the decision-making process. Professionalisation requires more than actual needs-based training. University administrators must have professional career development based on performance management and development and personal training-needs analysis. With a well-functioning, professional administration with a recognised input into the decision-making process, the desired reduction in the administrative burden on academic staff should follow.

HOW DOES THE UNIVERSITY KNOW THAT IT WORKS?

12. Accreditation

As the Slovak government has agreed to adopt the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*¹ (hereafter termed *European Standards and Guidelines*), they have made a commitment to trying to achieve the correct balance between external and internal quality assurance.

The current quality assurance system is primarily based on external accreditation of programmes in prescribed study fields. The guarantee of quality appears to be a compliance test, which is input-based, with a system of academic guarantors, based on staff competence and core subject matter. It does not seem to cover sufficiently matters such as admission, assessment and student support. Basically, matters of learning outcome, also at the level of modules and integrating aspects of generic competences, seem to play too minor a role compared to matters of input.

The EUA team were surprised that the process of accreditation could occur without site visits. As such, there is a problem with compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines*, which advocates adoption of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up mode of review.

The *European Standards and Guidelines* are designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe, irrespective of their structure, function and size, and the national system in which they are located. The guidelines also recognise the primacy of national systems, the importance of institutional and agency autonomy within these national systems and the particular requirements of different academic subjects.

Notwithstanding the above, the *European Standards and Guidelines* are formulated on the basic principle whereby it is the providers of higher education who have the primarily responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance.

13. Quality Assurance

An important objective of the university development plan is the design and implementation of a university management and quality assurance system, primarily for the areas of teaching, research and university administration. The university recognises that on-going quality assurance at university level is an important current European trend and that it is also a vital interest of the university. Following the preliminary visit, a request was made by the review team as to whether there was a formal statement or document about university quality assurance. The university indicated that the goals of quality assurance were contained, inter alia, in the university's long-term development plan.

In terms of the compatibility of the university's internal quality assurance system and the external quality assurance of the Accreditation Commission, the university, in the SER, acknowledges that, at present, there is no suitable method or system in Slovakia for assessing the quality of the activity of universities and faculties and that the Accreditation Commission has not presented any proposal for a quality evaluation system that would be compatible or at least comparable to the European approach.

It is therefore commendable that the university, on its own initiative, instituted an evaluation of faculties as far back as 1999, following the model developed by (the then CRE, now) EUA for institutional evaluation. It is also encouraging to note that the new higher education act requires higher education institutions to carry out a regular evaluation of the quality of their teaching and research. The review team concurs with the university's assertion that if Slovakia's orientation toward European structures is to continue, one of the most important reform measures will be to introduce monitoring procedures and quality assurance, in which self-evaluation plays a key part.

Quality Assurance of Study Programmes

The university does not have a formal statement or document about student assessment of the quality of teaching. In 2002, a university-wide model of student questionnaire for the evaluation of education for university graduates was approved.

However, during the visit, it was evident that the university questionnaire had a low return rate from students and that the level of feedback to students was not sufficient. Furthermore, while the on-line evaluation form indicated that the survey was anonymous, there was a requirement to input a student identity number. While it was clearly indicated that the student identification number was used only as an authorisation code for access to the system, the feedback to the review team from students was that this contributed to the low level of return of the evaluation forms.

The evaluation survey was restricted to covering the areas of course content, course organisation and the quality of the teacher's work. While the evaluation of these areas are vital for assessing compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines*, it is also necessary to ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered. This includes physical resources such as libraries or computing facilities. All in all, the quality assurance system should be developed further to fully embrace all aspects relevant to the quality of programmes, covering not only individual performance but also the entire compilation of the programme and all its corollaries, based on various methods of scrutiny extending well beyond student questionnaires. Surveys should guarantee anonymity in order to ensure wide representation.

It is important that the learning resources and other support mechanisms should be readily accessible to students, designed with their needs in mind and responsive to feedback from those who use the services provided. Institutions should routinely monitor, review and improve the effectiveness of the support services available to their students.

There needs to be a more comprehensive evaluation including the assessment of student support facilities, of employability, of the assessment system, of the library and IT systems. It must be stressed that this is not simply a matter of getting data. There must be proper transparency and feedback to the students. It was clear, (as is many other areas of evaluation) that there are pockets of good practice in quality assurance in the university. However, the challenge (faced by all universities) is to ensure that processes become systematic and comprehensive while avoiding the problems associated with 'survey fatigue' and processes becoming too routine and repetitive. In particular, there is a need to avoid an over concentration of quality assurance which is solely in the form of assessment of individual performance.

Full adoption of the Bologna process where competences are integrated at the level of the module descriptors should assist in the development of a systematic and comprehensive quality assurance system for study programmes.

Student Assessment of Quality

The review team was provided with a number of documents detailing faculty study regulations. The balance between continuous assessment and end-of semester examinations is required to be outlined in the information sheet for each subject. The form of the terminal examination can be written or oral or a combination of both. A number of concerns in relation to assessment arose in discussions with students. There appeared to be an over reliance on oral examinations, which were conducted

on a one-to-one basis, without moderation. The study regulations gave no guide as to the conduct of oral examinations, other than a requirement not to have more than 15 students examined on one day. It is the view of the review team that an over reliance on oral examinations, particularly where only one examiner is involved and where an appeal system is difficult to implement, is incompatible with good practice in quality assurance, giving rise to the possibility or potential for unfairness, bias and inconsistency of standards.

Quality Assurance of Research

There is evidence of a research strategy in some Faculties. The review team were pleased to hear that there were recent examples of project proposals becoming more selective, of projects being grouped and attempts being made to generate a critical mass. The trend in the use of performance-related research funding to faculties based on transparent criteria is also encouraging.

HOW DOES THE UNIVERSITY CHANGE IN ORDER TO IMPROVE?

14. Capacity for change and constraints

Before making recommendations for change, it is important to assess the university's change capacity and particularly to identify constraints in achieving the objectives of any development or strategic plan.

Some of these constraints can be organisational or managerial and may arise from the legal prescription of the university's structures and decision-making process.

On inspecting the university's organisational structure and the role of its decision-making bodies, it appears to be overly complex.

Horizontally, there is the Rectorate, the Academic Senate and the Scientific Board. This structure is then multiplied vertically at the Faculty level with the Deanery, Faculty Academic Senate and Faculty Scientific Board. This appears to be a recipe for lots of people, lots of bodies, lots of committees and lots of meetings. This would appear to be very costly in terms of staff time and to offer too many opportunities to slow down processes. The composition of the bodies is also such that there may be a compromise of democracy at the expense of expertise.

The review team did, however, come across examples whereby individual faculties interpreted their statutes in a flexible way and used them to opportunity. For instance, one of the faculty scientific boards contains some foreign members, which facilitates international benchmarking.

As to whether the university needs to change its internal structures in order to implement its objectives, the review team contend that university organisation should follow from mission and vision, just as form follows function. Any structure should be fit for purpose. In this context, there should be clarification of the concept of decentralisation vis-à-vis centralised responsibilities. Furthermore, the role of the management personnel should be revised, leading to a more integrated role in planning.

The team is aware of the fact that any such organisational changes mean, and require, an institutional culture of cooperation and trust. While this is the case in Comenius University, there

may be room for improvement, e.g. by implementing transparency policies – which above all means clarity of processes and criteria, and communicating these fully; improving internal communication, and ensuring that there is not only vivid exchange of opinion but also integration of grass-root voices into strategic planning and feedback as appropriate.

15. Development of a Strategic Plan

The review team contend that the single, most important requirement for the university is the development of a strategic plan. At the meta-level, the strategic plan can flow from the 3 objectives outlined by the university to the review team during the course of the review visits.

- The development of a Research university;
- The adoption of the European Study Model
- The maintenance of a broad knowledge base

The review team were impressed by the SER and how it had identified the weaknesses and opportunities for the university. The SWOT analysis produced a long ‘to-do’ list. What is now required is the translation of this into a strategic plan for the university. The university needs to concentrate on the ‘who, what, how and when’ of this plan and to develop the most useful instruments to help implement it.

It is not the function of the review team to outline the mechanism for implementation of the strategic development plan. However, for change management to be successful, it must take place at not only at the level of the managerial and technical aspects but also at the level of cultural or atmospheric change.

On the technical/managerial side, the development of a strategic plan needs a reasonably small, representative, university-level steering committee. This committee must be responsible for the steering process and must monitor the implementation of the strategic plan.

In the opinion of the EUA team, the rector’s college is in the best position, in principle, to do this, as it is representative of the central leadership, through the Rector and team of Vice-Rectors and the Deans, the Faculty leaders but is also representative of the Academic Senate.

The development of the strategic plan should be steered by the rector’s college, but the plan must have the endorsement of the Academic Senate and the Senate must accept the steering committee. There must be a balance between leadership and trust. The development of the plan must be characterised by a clear purpose and process.

The means of developing the plan must be up to the university community but the EUA team believe that the substructure should be thematic in nature rather than mechanically looking at the Faculty structure.

The substructures in the development of the plan should be designed of their own accord but the university must find the best means of cross-fertilising ideas from the bottom-up. Drawing on existing structures will help this. For instance, a theme based around the Bologna process could be facilitated by a group consisting of the Vice Rector for Education and the Faculty Vice-Deans of Study. This may be the best way of developing best practice for the university as a whole by

learning from the good practice in individual faculties that was clearly evident to the review team during the visits.

It is important that the university's administration is involved in the development of the plan, as they will be needed for support.

In the development of a strategic plan, there is much to be learned from other institutions that have gone through the same process. Comenius University, because of its proximity to other nations in central Europe such as Austria, the Czech Republic and Switzerland, may be able to adapt other successful models from universities in these countries. At any rate, it may be worth considering how to make use of external experience in certain topical areas in a systematic way.

The university is fortunate, also, to have a willing Board of Trustees, some of whom will be very familiar with the strategic planning process in the context of international business.

The strategic plan must be broken down into a series of concrete actions. These should encompass focal areas such as:

- the Bologna process, including quality assurance
- research strategies, including funding, recruitment and doctoral studies
- the link between teaching and research
- academic and administrative staff development

The university community must be confident that the body charged with the development and implementation of the strategic development plan is open and receptive. The leadership must operate on the basis of clear criteria and must create trust. It must consist of a 'listening leadership' that believes in the values of openness, transparency and communication. A 'listening leadership' has the capacity to turn the university into a truly 'learning organisation'.

16. Recommendations

In terms of strategic planning:

- Develop and publish as a matter of priority, a strategic plan based on the 3 main objectives of the university; to be a research university, to adopt the European study model and to maintain a broad knowledge base
- Prioritise the identified list of objectives in the long-term development plan into a series of concrete actions with an implementation and action plan which can be measured and monitored and which contains timelines and deliverables
- The strategic plan should articulate the desire to become an integrated university with the appropriate degree of subsidiarity and decision-making at the faculty level
- Develop a mechanism, at university level, to build on the good practice on strategic planning that has already commenced in some faculties
- Put in place a reasonably small, representative, university-level steering committee to develop the strategic plan
- Use the rector's college as a starting base for the steering committee
- Ensure that the steering committee has the endorsement of the Academic Senate
- Develop a communications plan that ensures that the university as a whole is aware of the strategic planning process so as to build trust

- Develop a plan that is thematic in nature rather than an amalgamation of individual faculty plans
- If thematic sub-committees of the steering committee are established, ensure that these committees are appropriate vehicles for cross-fertilisation and dissemination of the good practice that is taking place in many areas of teaching, research and quality assurance across the university
- Ensure that the university's administration is involved in and can contribute productively to the strategic planning process
- Make use of institutions in neighbouring countries who have longer experience in the development of university strategic plans
- Ensure that the Board of Trustees are kept abreast of the strategic planning process and its progress

In terms of study programmes and the Bologna reforms:

- Complete the programme restructuring utilising the learning outcomes and competences approach required in the Bologna process
- Apply the ECTS system properly in all programmes with appropriate recognition, in order to improve student mobility
- Develop a student workload concept to replace the system based on hours of instruction
- Enter into dialogue with the labour market and the relevant authorities so as to increase the acceptance of the Bachelor's degree for entry to employment.
- Develop a mechanism, at university level, to build on the good practice in relation to the employability of Bachelors graduates that has already commenced in some faculties
- Make increasing use of Masters programmes as joint programmes between faculties
- Use the programme restructuring process as an opportunity to eliminate duplication of programmes in different faculties

In terms of research:

- Use the development of Masters and doctoral programmes to increase the linkages between teaching and research
- Grasp the opportunities for interdisciplinary research, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Put in place a development plan and mechanisms to increase the number of teaching staff educated to PhD level
- Use the opportunities presented by retiring professors for targeted strategic recruitment of research staff in fields identified as a research priority for the university or in which the university can achieve a critical mass of researchers
- Put in place increased administrative supports so as to improve the chances of success when making application to European Union research programmes
- Increase the number of doctoral students involved in international exchanges

In terms of diversifying revenue streams:

- Develop strategies for increasing the level of funding that can be obtained from private contracts
- Develop policies on intellectual property protection and patent monitoring based on international best practice
- Establish and staff an alumni office to international best practice level

In terms of university administration:

- Put in place a system of professional development for administrative staff, designed to increase their motivation and to reduce the administrative burden on academic staff
- Involve senior administrative staff in the decision-making process, including their formal recognition on university decision-making bodies

In terms of quality assurance:

- Through dialogue with the accreditation commission ensure that the accreditation process in the university follows the *European Standards and Guidelines*
- Prepare a formal university statement on quality assurance which covers all relevant aspects of quality
- Design, implement and publish a development plan of a university management and quality assurance system, for the areas of teaching, research and university administration
- Continue and enhance the practice of quality evaluation of faculties
- Develop and publish a formal statement about student assessment of the quality of teaching
- Find a means to ensure that students have complete trust in the anonymity of student evaluation of the quality of teaching
- Ensure that the student evaluation of teaching is fit for purpose, so that the evaluations are tailored to the programmes, so that, for instance, laboratory-based programmes are evaluated in an appropriate manner
- Ensure that the evaluations cover the resources available for the support of student learning including the physical infrastructure such as lecture theatres, laboratories, libraries and IT facilities
- Develop a mechanism, at university level, to build on the good practice on student evaluation of the quality of teaching that is present already in some faculties
- Reduce the over reliance on oral examinations in some programmes
- Ensure that, as far as possible, oral examinations are not conducted on a one-to-one basis
- Publish an updated policy on oral examinations to reflect the changes recommended above
- Develop a mechanism, at university level, to build on the good practice on research evaluation that has commenced recently in some faculties whereby research proposals are becoming more selective and whereby projects are being grouped in an attempt to generate critical mass

17. Concluding remarks

The EUA team left Comenius University with a feeling of tremendous optimism and with the belief that if the changes necessary for higher education to develop and prosper in Slovakia are to happen, they are more likely to occur in Comenius University and endorse its role as a natural 'champion' which Comenius University maintains, given its size, positioning, historical importance and geographical placement.

Envoi

The EUA team wishes to thank Comenius University once again for the excellent arrangements provided for the review team. It was a pleasure to be in Bratislava and to work with the staff, students, and external stakeholders of the university. This review has taken place during an interesting time for Slovak higher education. The team trusts that Comenius University will find its comments and suggestions helpful, and wishes this university all the best for the next stage of its development.

Reference

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (2005), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, Helsinki, Finland.