Vilnius University

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of Vilnius University. EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated Vilnius University in 2004 with the report submitted to the University in September 2004. Subsequently In 2010 the University requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation. The follow-up evaluation site visit took place on 6-9 February 2011.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture.

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:
- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes, research or units. It focuses upon:
- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a 'fitness for (and of) purpose' approach:
- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 The Follow-Up Process

The aim of the follow-up process is to identify the impact that the initial evaluation has had on the institution's development, investigate the experiences gained from changes implemented after the initial evaluation, and give further impetus for change. Depending on the specific situation in each institution the follow-up takes account of new changes in the institutional environment, and reviews challenges and obstacles that have been faced in the implementation of the recommendations in the original review report, etc. As with the original evaluation the cornerstone of the follow-up review is the university's self-evaluation,

which allows the university staff to understand their institution's strengths and weaknesses. In the follow-up review the self-evaluation report focuses on progress made since the first review, possibly indicating barriers to change. However, since the overall review process is dynamic rather than static, the follow-up review should take into account new developments and reforms, both within the institution and in the wider environment.

The follow-up Self-Evaluation Report of Vilnius University, together with its 23 appendices, was sent to the team on January 18, 2011. The SER gave a clear account of the developments in the university since the IEP report in 2004, and the steps taken to implement the recommendations contained in the report. In general the university accepted the main recommendations to a greater or lesser degree, and has tackled them with varying levels of success. In the area of research management VU has made important advances, but progress in the implementation of key recommendations on teaching and learning has been slow and partial ... in some cases it only began as late as last year.

1.3   The Evaluation Team
The site visit by the evaluation team took place on 6-9 February 2011.

The Evaluation Team consisted of:
- Professor Bent Schmidt-Nielsen, former Rector, the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University, Denmark (Chair)
- Professor Gülsün Saglamer, former Rector, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey
- Mr Urs Brudermann, Student Representative, Biel/Bienne, Switzerland
- Professor Don McQuillan, former Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board, Ireland (Team Coordinator)

The team would like to acknowledge warmly the co-operation and hospitality we received throughout the visit. We thank the Rector, Professor Dr Habil. Benediktas Juodka, who signed the invitation letter to EUA, the vice-rectors, deans and department heads who actively supported us during the visit and all the staff and students, as well as stakeholders from outside the university, for their helpful contribution to our discussions.

We wish especially to thank Professor Rimantas Vaitkus and Professor Virginijus Tamasevicius for their efficiency in organising the documentation, liaising with the evaluation team and maintaining our daily schedule.

2.   Internal and External Environment

Higher education in Lithuania is facing pressures from a variety of sources. State funding of universities is being cut because of the difficult economic situation and there are severe demographic constraints: since Lithuania became a member of the European Union emigration of young people has risen sharply, and the birth rate over recent years has been in serious decline: there were 30,200 births in 2000 compared to 56,000 in 1991. Given that there are 14 state and 7 non-state universities in the country as well as 15 state and 13 non-state colleges, the competition for students is keen.

The law governing higher education has been changed several times over the past twenty years. A new one, the Law on Higher Education and Research, was adopted in 2009, although several articles in the law are still under discussion and a final decision by the Constitutional Court is awaited. The law makes fundamental changes in the way students are funded, in the property rights of universities, in the organisation and powers of the University Council, etc.

Vilnius University (VU) is the oldest, largest and the most prestigious higher education institution in Lithuania, dating back to 1570 when it was founded as a Jesuit college. In spite of the many problems it has faced since independence in 1990 VU has made impressive progress, due in no small part to the quality of its teachers and researchers, its students (with an involved and active student union), its leadership, and its administrative support staff. The university has attracted large grants from the European Structural Funds, and, in spite of the financial and demographic issues, the university continues to attract many of the best students in the country. On the downside, there is an aging staff profile and the university finds it difficult to attract young scholars to the academic life because of unattractive salaries.

3.   Strategic Management

One of the key recommendations in the 2004 IEP report was that the university should develop an overarching strategic plan for the institution as a whole that expands on its mission and vision statements. In the meantime VU has established new mission and vision statements that are entirely appropriate to one of Europe's oldest universities, "where old traditions and new ideas enrich each other." The university prepared a strategic plan for 2007-2013 based on these statements and driven by two strategic objectives:

- Train specialists of the highest level and ensure the scientific competence of the country
- Use the intellectual resources, infrastructure and assets of the university efficiently

These general objectives were refined to seven key institutional activities covering the central operations of a modern university. The team congratulates VU on this detailed plan. However at first sight it looks like a mere wish list, a collection of desirable outcomes with no indication as to how these outcomes can be achieved. Subsequently it emerged in our discussions over the two days that in fact many items in the plan have been carried to a successful conclusion. The plan had not been updated to reflect these successes or to take account of changed circumstances with the passage of time. Crucially the large financial grants received in EU Structural Funds had not been integrated into the plan.

The team feels that this is a good time to prepare a new strategic plan, in a format that is now prevalent in many universities. It is important to emphasise that planning is a continuous process. Thus the plan itself and the SWOT analysis on which it is based must be updated on an ongoing basis. This requires solid data to support conclusions and to position the university to meet new developments. **Therefore VU should establish a capability for the collection of data relevant to the strategic plan**.

The Strategic Plan should include the detailed steps to be taken to achieve the desired objectives and expected outcomes. Good organisation and agreed procedures are essential. The objectives should be prioritised, and each objective should be stated in a clear and unambiguous way. An action plan for the successful achievement of each objective should be established, responsibility for completion assigned, and allocation of required resources agreed. Each objective should have a time frame for completion and precise indicators of success should be set down beforehand. Each year the plan should be evaluated and updated. Central to this is ongoing supervision and direction at the highest level.

The team recommends that the university should establish a Strategic Planning Committee chaired by the rector. The first task of the committee should be to develop a new long term Strategic Plan for the years 2011-2017. The plan should include special focus on implementation and monitoring.

A sense of ownership of the strategic plan throughout the university is essential to the success of the process. This can be achieved using a fairly common methodology. In the first

instance each faculty prepares a SWOT analysis based on contributions from the individual departments. These are then confronted with the university's vision, mission and strategic objectives, and harmonised by the Strategic Planning Committee to produce an overarching strategic plan for the whole university. The plan should be discussed widely, and then finalised and approved by the competent governance bodies. This is a complex and difficult task involving as it does repeated top-down and bottom-up debate within the university. Inevitably there will be competing agendas, and tension between the various elements of the university. No university finds it easy to arrive at the type of institution-wide consensus that is required if such a process is to have an effective and fruitful outcome. University leaders will play a vital role in bringing doubters along and in creating the conviction that the task is worth the effort.

The SER notes that gaining the support of some faculties in such a planning exercise has proved difficult in the past. This state of affairs is new to the members of the team. The VU faculties do not have autonomy, and it is the responsibility of the central leadership to drive the process of strategic planning.

4.   Governance and Organisation

The new Law on Higher Education and Research has changed substantially the legal framework of the university. There will be a Senate which will be mainly responsible for academic affairs, and a University Council with greatly enhanced powers. According to the SER the Council will determine the university mission, strategy and internal structure, appoint the rector, approve the annual university budget, establish staff selection criteria, etc. It seems to the team that the strategic and operational effect of the new system will be that the Rector will become the Chief Executive Officer of the university, working very closely with the Council to lead the university into the next phase of its development. This is in keeping with the international trend of the growing power of executive leadership in universities. It is clear from the SER, as well as from our many meetings across the university, that there is an awareness of the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. As we have already noted, driving change in the context of an overarching university strategic plan covering all activities of VU will be one of the most important of these challenges. Developing the regional role of the university in such enterprises as the Sunrise Valley project, raising the regional, national and international profile of the university, optimising limited resources and extending the success of external funding are others. All this will require a united approach and generous collaboration in all sectors of the university. There will have to be an agreement that internal discussion will be used to resolve disagreements and form a consensus, with no recourse to external intervention. With regard to the composition of the University Council there will be eleven members as follows: five representatives of the university, to include three members of the academic staff, one student, and one representative of the administrative units; five members appointed by the minister from outside the university; one member selected by agreement between the minister and the university.

The team applauds the inclusion of external stakeholders. This again reflects a growing international trend, and, if properly implemented, has many advantages: the wide-ranging autonomy granted to the university is balanced by public and transparent accountability to the society that maintains it; VU will have a direct line to social and economic developments in the country; the university will have immediate access to experienced regional and national advice when preparing its strategic plan.

However we stress most forcibly that these benefits will only be realised if the external members are wisely and judiciously chosen, men and women from civil society with a proven record of interest in the university and knowledge of how the university interacts with society.

The team recommends that the external members of the Council should include stakeholders of the University who are prominent members of civil society, chosen from a list presented by the University Senate.

The team recognises VU's desire for broad democratic agreement in its decision-making procedures. Thus there is a large Senate with wide representation across the university, and many committees with varying levels of power and influence representing all sectors of the

institution. While sympathetic to this collegial approach the team wonders if VU will be able to respond rapidly enough to the issues facing the modern university: increased competition for scarce resources, economic globalisation with the resulting demand from government and society for more and better trained graduates, especially in the sciences, the need to establish improved research capabilities for assisting/underpinning national competitiveness. The team fears that seeking consensus in an extensive consultative process may lead to delayed decisions and compromises that are ultimately inimical to the best interests of the university.

The team recommends that the number of senators and the number of committees should be reduced.

The Ernst & Young report on governance in VU notes an international trend toward decreasing the number of academic units and divisions in universities. From experience of teaching and researching in many universities in Europe and the United States the team is broadly in agreement with this trend, and suggests that in the case of VU a reduction in the number of departments and faculties would serve the university well. We note that the Law and Medical faculties in VU have made good progress with internal restructuring, and urge other faculties to follow this good example. The resulting synergies and possibilities for more interdisciplinary cooperation will make these innovations well worth the effort. A reduction in the number of faculties along the lines common in many universities around the world would yield similar benefits.

The team recommends that the number of departments and faculties should be reduced. In accordance with common practice the University might consider the following faculty structure:

Faculty of Humanities
Faculty of Law
Faculty of Medicine
Faculty of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social Sciences

This list is given as an indication only, and may not reflect optimal structures for the University of Vilnius.

5.   Quality Assurance and Management

In the 2004 report the IEP team commented on the accreditation system in use at that time in Lithuania, noting that this was not a quality assurance instrument as understood in the Bologna Process. The present team therefore welcomes the changes envisaged in the new law and comments further on this in the section on teaching and learning.

Since 2004 the university has taken several steps to improve the quality of its activities. It has established an Electronics Studies and Examination Centre which, among other functions, conducts examinations for students and is in the process of implementing an electronic plagiarism checking system, the first such system in Lithuania. The Internal Audit Division monitors the university's financial administration. In addition VU has laid the foundations for further improvements by participating in several management improvement projects. The team commends the university on these initiatives.

More importantly, for the quality of teaching and learning, VU has created the Quality Management Centre whose purpose is "to introduce and improve various internal quality assurance processes and procedures". The main focus of the Centre has been the development of a systematic university-wide electronic questionnaire process to evaluate the response of students to teaching and courses. Again the team commends the university on this important initiative. Unfortunately it appears that the system is not working well. The student response rate never exceeds 16% and the follow-up in faculties, according to students we spoke to, is either weak or non-existent. VU must see that these poor outcomes are not acceptable in Lithuania's leading university, and do not represent value for money. This is a situation that can only be rectified at university level, with the full engagement, cooperation and acceptance of the students.

The team recommends that as a matter of urgency the university should develop a more effective system for the evaluation of teaching and courses by students, with timely feedback and follow-up.

In the Strategic Operational Plan for 2007-2013 the vision of Vilnius University includes the creation of a well-functioning quality assurance system. This is a key action point of the Bologna Process and was also part of VU's vision in 2004. At that time the IEP Evaluation Report outlined a framework for the process of internal quality assurance advocated by the EUA and stated:

"Consistent with the university's vision we suggest that VU establish a robust quality assurance system based on the Berlin Communiqué of Education Ministers and the EUA Graz Declaration, with the goal of improving all activities of the university. This is central to VU's integration into the evolving European Higher Education Area "

We note that the process of internal quality assurance advocated there is consistent with the more recently published European Standards and Guidelines, and is in use in several European countries for many years. Thus the university should not attempt to reinvent the wheel. See for instance www.iuqb.ie

The team therefore reiterates the above recommendation for the creation of an internal quality assurance system. Experience shows that it is important to have a systematic approach to this work with agreed procedures and internal structures, overseen by a high level university committee and organised by a director.

The team recommends that VU should establish internal quality assurance procedures and develop guidelines for their implementation. There should be a high level standing committee, chaired by the vice-rector for academic affairs, to oversee the process. VU should set up a Quality Office and appoint a Director of Quality Assurance to organise the operational procedures.

6.   Teaching and Learning

Under the new Law on Higher Education and Research the university expects to get much more freedom in preparing and implementing study programmes. Following a two-year transitional period the university will not have to submit each new study programme to the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education for approval. Instead, a university and programme accreditation procedure will come into effect. This is an important development, warmly welcomed by the team, since it gives a large measure of autonomy to VU in one of its central academic activities. The Curriculum Committee recommended in the 2004 report will have a central role here**.**

The university has introduced the three-cycle degree structure proposed in the Bologna Process, apart from Law and Medicine where the first and second cycles are integrated. ECTS is in the process of being implemented and there is 'an orientation of studies toward learning outcomes.' According to the SER a large number of new original teaching tools have been prepared and new modern equipment for learning has been acquired through the European Structural Funds. In addition a strategic document in the area of lifelong learning is in preparation. The team welcomes these positive developments.

However the move from a teaching to a learning university has been very slow. Various reasons for this are offered: staff age structure, very high student/teacher ratio in some areas (e.g. social sciences), the teacher evaluation system does not encourage substantial revision of the old teaching methods. Nevertheless the team insists that this issue is too important to be set aside, no matter what local difficulties exist. The ways and means of carrying out the transition from a teaching to a learning environment are well known and can be found on the internet.

The team recommends that the university should provide facilities for the utilisation of existing expertise in the transition process from teaching to learning.

The benefits of a modular course system were presented in detail in the 2004 report so there is no need to rehearse them here. The university agrees that the modular system should be introduced and has started discussions to this end. The team understands the complications of moving from the present system: reluctance on the part of entrenched academics, difficulties of time-tabling, etc. We have all been through it. However it is not something that can be done piecemeal. It must be done all over the university with all faculties and departments working in unison.

The team recommends that the implementation of the modular system should take place at the beginning of the next academic year.

7. Research and Development

In 2004 the VU application for evaluation by IEP emphasised research as a priority area. Consequently the IEP report went into great detail with recommendations on the management of VU's Research and Development activities. In spite of severe financial constraints it is gratifying to see that much effective work has been done in the intervening years in this area. However the rate of research publication in the years since 2004 has not shown significant change. While the number of books increased from 172 to 263 in the period 2004 to 2009, the number of articles in foreign journals held steady at around 550 each year and the number in Lithuanian journals fell from 1531 to 1239.

A Science Department has been established to manage scientific projects thus easing the bureaucratic burden on the academic divisions preparing projects. VU scientists have been highly successful in winning grants for projects under the Universal Scholarly Grant scheme introduced by the Research Council of Lithuania. The university has established a Science Promotion Fund that provides support for each doctoral student to obtain training at a selected foreign university. In addition VU has set up a special fund for funding doctoral studies, although the SER admits that 'further management of doctoral studies actually remains quite a serious problem.'

Interdisciplinary research remains a problem, though this should improve upon establishing joint research centres and integrating research institutes into the university. In 2010 four institutes became part of the VU structure: Institute of Biochemistry, Institute of Biotechnology, Institute of Mathematics and Informatics, Institute of Theoretical Physics and Astronomy. A full integration into relevant departments should be considered.

Attracting foreign scientists to Lithuania to work on common projects is very difficult due to a lack of adequate research facilities and insufficient financial incentives. Even projects financed by the Research Council and EU Structural Funds are unfavourable for scientists from abroad since remuneration is pegged to Lithuanian salaries. The postdoctoral training programme encounters the same problems. Nevertheless the team urges VU researchers to continue their efforts to develop collaboration further with colleagues abroad.

The SER notes that the level of VU entrepreneurship is currently low and that the university receives a relatively small number of orders from business companies. In this connection VU actively participates in the state project Sunrise Valley jointly with Vilnius Technical University and Vilnius city municipality. Real investment is just starting here. It currently houses over twenty enterprises 'creating high added value'. Further developments include the establishment of the National Centre for Physical and Technological Sciences and the Centre for Life Sciences. The team commends the establishment of the Vilnius Science Park. It is an important initiative in developing cooperation between VU and local business and technological enterprises, and we urge the university to continue in its efforts to find new and inventive ways to further expand external collaboration for the benefit both of the university and society.

The team recommends that the university should continue to stimulate collaboration with external partners.

There are two issues on which the team would like to make recommendations. They are both related to funding. The first involves the issue of setting priority scientific research areas. Clearly it is impossible for VU to be a top class research university in all the areas in which it does research. So it makes sense to concentrate in a special way on those areas which are most promising, will improve its international profile, and are most likely to attract funding, especially funding from abroad. This is not to say that other areas will not be active, and indeed attract funding. Academic freedom demands that scientists be free to pursue their research goals. The other issue has to do with the difficulty of finding funding to develop promising new research ideas.

The team recommends that the university should seek to establish a balance between priority research areas and areas that attract research funding. The university should set aside seed money to promote promising new research ideas.

8. Internationalisation

The university has made a strong, if delayed, response to the detailed recommendations contained in the 2004 IEP report. The Vilnius University Internationalisation Action Plan was approved at the start of 2010, and a new position of Vice-Rector for International Affairs has been established. VU has established new contacts and signed new agreements. Following the approval of a Baltic Sea Strategy the SER notes that 'Vilnius University representing Lithuania together with the Baltic University Programme coordinated by the Swedish Uppsala University has become the coordinator of the flagship project of the entire Baltic Sea Region University Network'

VU has introduced study programmes in foreign languages, primarily English. Eleven such programmes have been registered to date. The number of Erasmus students shows continuous increase, from 89 in 2005/2006 to 218 in 2009/2010, with the total number of international 'partial students' increasing from 159 to 340 over the same period. The number of international 'continual students' increased from 89 to 197. The team had a stimulating meeting with international students and teachers. Unfortunately the number of VU staff and students going abroad on the Erasmus scheme is small, due mainly to limited financial support.

In spite of the financial problems there has been important progress made in the development of international research activity, as we have noted in the section on research, particularly in the mobility of PhD students. In the area of Joint Master degrees with foreign universities it seems that some legal problems involving the conferring of the degree jointly by both institutions are in the process of being overcome.

We return to the issue of attracting foreign students to study at VU. The SER notes several problems: the small number of foreign-language programmes and joint programmes; the university's study management system is not oriented towards the needs of foreign students, indeed there is a lack of: English-speaking staff, suitable accommodation, suitable leisure activities. Nevertheless the team feels that some measures can be undertaken to increase the number of students both in and out.

The university should

(i)   **Do more to market its study programmes abroad (e.g. webpage information   in foreign languages)**

(ii)   **Exploit the potential to attract students of Lithuanian heritage**

(iii)   **Offer a wider variety of courses in English.**

(iv)   **Attempt to remove financial and linguistic barriers to the mobility of Lithuanian students**

8. Conclusion

We would like to acknowledge warmly once again the co-operation and hospitality we received throughout the visit. We thank the rector, who signed the invitation letter to IEP, the vice-rectors, deans and department heads who actively supported us, and all the staff and students, as well as stakeholders from outside the university, for their helpful contribution to our discussions. It was a pleasure to be in Vilnius University to discuss with students and staff the future directions of the University. At this time of profound and far-reaching change in higher education the university is to be congratulated for its frank and open examination of its ability to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. In all our meetings we were struck by the strong determination to see VU achieve its full potential. We hope that the university finds our comments and suggestions helpful, and we wish the university well for the next stage of its development.