

UNIVERSITY OF PRIMORSKA

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of the University of Primorska. European University Association's (EUA) Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated the University of Primorska in 2010 with the report submitted to the University in January 2011. Subsequently, in 2014 the University requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme and follow-up evaluation process

IEP is an independent membership service of the EUA that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

In line with the IEP philosophy as a whole, the follow-up process is a supportive one. There is no prescribed procedure, and it is for the institution itself to set the agenda in the light of its experiences since the original evaluation. The institution is expected to submit its own self-evaluation report, which will describe the progress made, possibly indicating barriers to change.

The rationale is that the follow-up evaluation can assist the institution in evaluating the changes that have been made since the original evaluation: What was the impact of the original evaluation? What use has the institution made of the original evaluation report? How far has it been able to address the issues raised in the report? The follow-up evaluation is also an opportunity for the institution to take stock of its strategies for managing change in the context of internal and external constraints and opportunities.

As for the original evaluation, the follow-up process is also 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 the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 A profile of the University of Primorska

The University of Primorska (UP) was established in 2003 as the third public university in Slovenia after the University of Ljubljana (founded after the First World War) and the University of Maribor (1975). Located in a bilingual area, it is also known by its Italian name, Università del Litorale, which makes clear that it is a coastal university. While the central administration of UP and most of its facilities are in Koper, there are faculties in Izola and Portorož, all three seaports on the short Adriatic coast of the Slovenian region of Primorska. The new university consisted of research and educational institutions that had been established between in 1991 and 2002, after Slovenian independence, and it was a major project in the region.

The UP currently (2014-15) has ten members and two associate members, with 5802 students in its main faculties. The members and associate members are:

- Faculty of Humanities
 - Faculty of Management
 - Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies
 - Faculty of Education
 - Faculty of Tourism Studies
 - Faculty of Health Sciences
 - Science and Research Centre
 - Andrej Marušič Institute
 - Student Residence
 - University Library
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- Faculty of Design, Ljubljana
 - Valdoltra Orthopaedic Hospital

In accord with general Slovenian practice, two of the members, the Student Residence and the library, are support units; unusually in Slovenia, two others are multidisciplinary research institutes.

In 2012–13 UP underwent the re-accreditation process of the Slovenian quality assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA), which involved a self-evaluation exercise, a visit on 4 - 6 December 2012 by a seven-person accreditation team that included experts from Austria and Spain, and a report dated 29 March 2013. Institutional re-accreditation for seven years, until 30 September 2020, was subsequently granted.

The overall governance and administration of UP resembles in some ways the highly decentralised structures of the large universities in Ljubljana (64 000 students) and Maribor (26 000 students). There is another (fourth, smallest and newest) university, the University of Nova Gorica, which is a “non-state founded university institution” located further north and inland, but also in the Primorska region. In addition there are recognised private professional colleges and arts academies that provide additional competition for the falling numbers of high school graduates.

However, UP is significantly different to its older and much larger “siblings” in its culture and attitudes to further development; its staff are on average much younger and UP is clearly committed to multidisciplinary research, which is carried out largely by members designed to support research. Nevertheless it is bound by the same national legislative framework which reflects, in ways that are unduly restrictive and in some respects grossly unfair, the values and interests of the older universities, particularly the oldest and largest. UP’s autonomy is also severely restricted financially with respect to the management of its resources. In the team’s view, UP’s general characteristics and situation may be summarised as follows:

- Small and peripheral.
- Poorly resourced with respect to real estate (74% of the necessary space is rented) and equipment.
- Falling student numbers, reflecting the national demographic trend.
- However, there are large differences between faculties with respect to maintaining / increasing student numbers.
- While research output is low but increasing, funding for research is already decreasing.
- Difficulties with respect to national educational reforms do not help —especially regarding the disconnection between funding and student numbers.
- While income is decreasing (-4.2% from 2011 to 14), teaching staff numbers are not, resulting in deficits which are bound to increase.

In individual countries there is a tendency to feel that national problems are somehow unique, in the belief that situations must be better elsewhere. However, the economic downturn in Europe has been much more prolonged and deeper than anticipated in 2008, and more widespread. While some countries have had to be “bailed out”, all are affected by reduced government revenues. Economic restrictions on education, and on universities in particular, are the norm in all countries. Many higher education systems have changed in response, and “concentration measures”, such as alliances and mergers among higher education institutions (HEIs), are common — some of which are voluntary and some imposed. Institutions of all types are having to innovate, diversify and engage more actively with their cities and regions to be successful, or even to survive. Globally, nationally and within HEIs, there is recognition that the grand challenges facing societies and all of humankind — such as accommodating ageing populations or dealing with climate change — need interdisciplinary approaches. It is now wholly recognised that competency in English is essential for institutions, as well as graduates, in order to be competitive, both at a national and international level.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a ten-person team, largely composed by senior officers of the university, appointed by the rector in May 2014. The members were:

- Associate Professor Nadja Plazar, PhD (Vice Rector for Academic Affairs of the University of Primorska), coordinator, *replaced in September 2014 as both a member and as coordinator by Associate Professor Dejan Hozjan on the authority of the rector*
- Associate Professor Tadeja Jere Jakulin, PhD (Vice Rector for International Cooperation of the University of Primorska), member
- Associate Professor Štefko Miklavič, PhD (Vice Rector for Scientific Research and Development of the University of Primorska), member
- Professor Rok Strašek, PhD (Vice Rector for Economics and Finance of the University of Primorska), member
- Alenka Andrejašič, MSc (Principal of the Quality Service of the University of Primorska), member

- Manca Drobne (Head of the Sector for Scientific Research and Development), member,
- Tatjana Mikelić Goja (Head of the Sector for International Cooperation of the University of Primorska), member,
- Barbara Morato (Head of the Sector for Education of the University of Primorska), member
- Frenk Mavrič, MSc (Head of the Service for Academic Affairs of the University of Primorska) member
- Mirko Ilić (President of the Student Council of the University of Primorska) member

An important impetus for the request by UP to IEP for this follow-up evaluation is its participation as from 2013 in a national project entitled “Development of Quality Culture and Operational Excellence”. There was also an explicit recommendation in the 2013 SQAA report that UP “possibly consider taking an [IEP] ‘follow up’”.

When the self-evaluation team as composed above was established it began by assembling and distributing among its members key documentation, including relevant national legislation (both implemented and being considered), national strategic plans, UP’s Strategic Plan 2014–20 and the 2010 IEP evaluation report. Members from the different sectors drafted relevant sections. The IEP team was told that the section in the report on human resources that presented the greatest difficulties, as this is not defined as a separate sector within the university (the question arose if this indicate the need for such a defined sector) After the sections intended for the report were combined and edited for style and continuity, the full draft self-evaluation report (SER) was discussed at meetings of the faculties, between other members of the university and the Student Council. The feedback obtained was used to make amendments. There was also no indication that it was available to staff and students on the university intranet. Despite this apparently full consultation process, the IEP team was under the impression that many individual members of staff had not seen the SER.

Despite some rather obscure paragraphs and tables, the SER itself and its appendices gave a very good account of UP, well supported by numerous graphs and much tabulated data. The SER also includes detailed assessments of UP’s actions to date in response to the 12 recommendations made in the 2010 IEP report, as well as the comprehensive 36-page document “The Mid-term Development Strategy of the University of Primorska: 2014–2020”.

The SER together with a comprehensive set of appendices, was sent to the evaluation team early in November 2014. The visit of the evaluation team to the university took place on 2-5 December 2014.

The team consisted of:

- Maria Helena Nazaré, former Rector, University of Aveiro, Portugal, Chair
- Mar Campins Eritja, former Vice-Rector for International Policy, University of Barcelona, Spain
- Christopher Bohlens, Student, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany

- Jim Gosling, former Director of Quality, National University of Ireland - Galway, Ireland, Team Coordinator.

The team thanks Rector Professor Dragan Marušič, the members of the Senate, the coordinator of the self-evaluation team, Associate Professor Dejan Hozjan, the members of the self-evaluation team, the officers and administrators, the deans and heads of department, and the teachers we met for their frankness, valuable time, and unfailing courtesy and hospitality. In particular we would like to thank Alenka Andrejašič, liaison person, for the excellent organisation of all aspects connected to the visit. We especially wish to thank the student leaders, student members of the Senate, and the students who we met from the Faculty of Management who were open, eloquent, helpful and impressive.

2. IEP Recommendations-2010, UP's Responses and some comments

In 2010, the team consisted of Phillipe Rousseau from France, Erdal Emel from Turkey, Sime Višić from Croatia, Helena Nazaré (Chair) and Jim Gosling (Tea Coordinator). As is standard practice with IEP, the chair and coordinator have the same roles in the follow-up evaluation. In 2010, two visits took place in June and November, and the final report is dated "December 2010". Since 2010, IEP has been involved in the evaluation of more than 100 other HEIs in Europe and beyond. Follow-up reviews are becoming a more common addition to IEP evaluations, and it is not unusual for UP to have requested it.

The remainder of this section is the team's assessment of UP's responses to the recommendations in the 2010 IEP report. To save space and preserve balance, most of the 12 recommendations are not repeated in this report in full; they are each numbered and in italics, followed by the team's comments in plain text.

1. UP should continue with and, where appropriate, accelerate its centralisation, rationalisation and expansion of support services to faculties, staff and students.

Because of the potential for efficiencies and support of new initiatives, such restructuring is very important and should be implemented as quickly as is feasible. The team notes that the new general secretary has taken this in hand as a specific project, that an officer has been assigned on a full time basis to this project, and that the re-organisation of services will be in two phases, the first of which is imminent.

2. Enhance "brand image", etc.

Accepted, being implemented but perhaps UP needs to be more ambitious with respect to how it (UP) is seen in Slovenia and beyond. An essential element of the developing "UP brand" should be the unique features of the university. Some of these are already evident (but perhaps not widely enough known), others may be unclear even to some of UP's staff, some are not yet sufficiently developed to be recognisable, and some are potential. In other words UP should focus its development on enhancing features that have the potential to be unique and admirable in the context of higher education and research, nationally and in the wider region. These may include the following more general features:

- Young and dynamic
- Strategic geographical location
- Multilingual environment
- Open to change and proactive

3. UP should use the allocation of academic appointments, facilities and space to support the achievement of strategic goals

When UP is in the process of designating institutional priority objectives and research areas, it should be explicit that there will be implications with respect to on-going allocations of an agreed portion of university income and resources.

4. Within agreed guidelines, there should be no impediments to the cross faculty use of teaching facilities and resources.

This recommendation has been implemented. A related question is: “should there now be incentives for greater sharing?”

5. When [planning] strategically and operationally, UP should take into account the state of progress of national reforms of higher education [... But without delaying] internal reforms because of [national] delays.

This continues to be valid. We have also learned that in 2014 UP will receive just 5.8% of the higher education budget, while having 6.7% of students nationally (weighted with respect to the resource intensity of their study programmes). This is approximately a 15% discount on an egalitarian distribution of the budget and UP should take every opportunity to argue for its fair and just share. This deficiency has been cumulative and UP should take every opportunity to also remind the government that compensation for past loss of income would also be just. Underfunding of UP is the underfunding of an important resource in the region and, therefore, also of relevance to the regional government. Related issues are the importance of UP being allowed to keep any budget surpluses that accrue and the desirability of incentives to generate such surpluses.

6. UP should establish a substantial on-going benchmarking exercise with 3-4 other equivalent universities ...

This recommendation is still valid and is urgent if UP wishes to identify ways in which it can meet its objectives most efficiently. Benchmarking is a very useful procedure for the identification of potential initiatives as well as ways in which specific improvements can be achieved. It can be applied with different levels of intensity, and with or without study visits, at all levels: institution, faculty, study programme, research centre, research programme, library, student residence, etc.

7. Continue the development of data handling and analysis to facilitate and to maximise the effectiveness of university and faculty decision-making.

The way in which data was analysed and is presented in the SER is evidence of progress, but this is a service that must develop and improve continuously.

8. Give more prominence to, and expand as necessary, pedagogical training and supports for all teachers in the University, in line with good practice internationally.

This is still valid. Permanent and continuous training opportunities are essential to teaching that complies with respected pedagogical principles *and* uses advanced technologies. Being widely recognised nationally and abroad (including in nearby Italy) as an institution where student-centred learning and innovation in teaching are the norm, is a potential unique feature for UP.

9. The basic framework for student feedback on teaching should be standardized ...

The aim should be to achieve a “feedback culture” in which all teachers at UP consider that asking for, and acting on, feedback from students is an inherent part of teaching. All students expect to be asked for their opinions, and see it as an essential duty to give them whilst knowing they will be taken into consideration. Continue to improve participation, the uses of the results, and the transparency of the process. While allowing for variations (that should be signaled to and approved by the head of the Quality Service) to pilot ways of improving participation, the process should be standardised over the next two to three years and the new questionnaire adjusted as necessary.

10. UP should initiate a review of its total research efforts:

- *Decide on a limited number of areas to be adopted formally by the Senate.*

This recommendation is still valid; success in a limited number of carefully chosen research areas is more likely because critical masses of researchers and resources may be more easily achieved. Identification of UP with the chosen areas will contribute to UP's uniqueness. The issue is prioritisation, and other research areas should not be intentionally inhibited since, after all, eventually one or more of these may earn the right to be favoured, and more quickly than expected.

- *Bring together existing research centres/institutes and groups to form a single overhead structure.*

This recommendation still holds and a properly organised single research centre would be capable of effectively supporting research-informed teaching and diverse student projects. The alternative of dispersing the research now carried out in the Science and Research Centre and in the Andrej Marušič Institute among the six faculties could seriously inhibit the interdisciplinary projects underway and act to prevent new ones. Distribution would not obviate the need for a well-resourced support centre to help researchers as they apply for and manage funding. Expensive research equipment needs to be accessible to the maximum number of expert users in a shared space, i.e. a research centre.

- *Facilitate the active participation of greater numbers of academic staff in research including transparent criteria for staff to join research centres.*

This recommendation still holds.

- *Provide a unified service to support all doctoral studies.*

Developing best practice indicates that a single doctoral school best supports doctoral-level training and structured PhD programmes in smaller universities. This supports the acquisition of essential transferable skills that maximise employability and could have a synergistic relationship with a single research centre.

- *Expand initiatives such as the “Research Excellence Fund” to enable and reward exceptional research output.*

This is being carried out within the limits of available funding.

11. If the recent reduction in the number of optional courses in the Faculty of Humanities has had the result of making the remaining electives more or less obligatory, a full review of the educational consequences should be carried out.

This is apparently implemented.

12. UP should act creatively to maximize the exposure of its students to international experience. [] With respect to incoming foreign students, UP should:

- *Increase the number courses taught in other languages.*

Done, but still more needed.

- *Provide intensive Slovene language and culture courses.*

Done, but will need constant evaluation and, as necessary, expansion.

- *Social and cultural activities for visiting and Slovenian students.*

Done, but, as for above, will need constant evaluation and expansion as necessary. This may be another opportunity for UP to be seen as exceptionally attractive, if not unique.

- *Lobby the government to have restrictions removed on courses in international languages and on employing staff from abroad.*

This is still valid and should have the full support of the Slovenian Rectors’ Conference.

3. Observations and Conclusions

The document “Mid-term Development Strategy of the University of Primorska: 2014–2020” has many substantial merits as a practical instrument; objectives are listed and quantities are stated for both present performance and aspired performance under all the important headings. The envisaged “UP of 2020” is to be a more balanced, culturally rich and supportive university. Most importantly the plan incorporates a timetable for the regular evaluation and updating *of itself*. However, on reading the entire document, the impression gained is of a long list largely of “hopes” rather than of realistic, costed expectations. In addition, responsibilities for implementation are not assigned to individual university or faculty/ (or other member) officers. Nevertheless, as a plan, it is a valuable piece of work that encapsulates the ambitions and probably most of the possibilities open to UP. Ideally, the rector will use the occasion of its next and subsequent annual reviews to revise it, if necessary significantly, in the light of feedback from university bodies, the faculties and other members, thereby increasing buy-in by members and individual staff, and improving its practicability. Splitting it into a quite short strategic plan supplemented by a more detailed and annually renewed operational plan, with shorter-term as well as longer-term goals, could enhance its utility.

The team noted that UP’s statement of mission is confined to what is prescribed by government and resembles a legal text in style, devoid of what the team has learned of UP’s own unique mission in the region and beyond. Insofar as the wording of this may be out of UP’s control, the wording of its “vision” becomes more important and, in the team’s opinion, the present version, while more focused and better than that of 2010, could be much improved.

Although not evident in the SER, in the “Strategic Plan 2014–2020” or on UP’s website, the team was pleased to note that UP has a Board of Trustees. This is referred to in the 2013 SQAA accreditation report as “unique in the Slovenian education system, as a consultative body to the Rector and very useful to the university”. This board should be more prominent in support of planning and related institutional decision making at UP.

During the team’s meeting with UP’s principal administrative officers, it became clear that UP has no designated internal audit function. Given Slovenian national demographics, the idiosyncratic governmental method for calculating funding, and potential European and global trends, risks to UP need to be regularly assessed, and precautions taken. The team also had reasons to believe that UP could profitably improve its acquisition and use of information on the growing number of its alumni and their employers (who may also be potential future employers of graduates).

It is obvious from the “Strategic Plan 2014–2020” that UP is committed to enhanced teaching and learning, to life-long learning and to supporting continuous professional development in the region. There is a commitment to the development of study programmes in the second and third cycle, and particularly programmes in English. While new fee-paying students have recently disappeared from some first cycle programmes, the team feels that opportunities for gaining income in this way should be assessed and, as appropriate, exploited to the full.

In the SER, in the “Strategic Plan 2014–2020” and during presentations, the desirability for UP to achieve excellence in three research fields was made clear. However, there is always an inference that, as research in general is encouraged and supported, these three areas will in any event emerge by themselves. This is impractical and begs the issues of the value of research planning and the targeted allocation of resources. Good choices of areas will enable important contributions to each area from many diverse disciplines in ways that may not be immediately obvious; novel interdisciplinary projects will be facilitated and opportunities for synergism maximised.

Given its important location and the background to its foundation, it is natural for UP to see itself as existing to support its near and larger international region. The team met some local stakeholders, from both private companies and public institutions, who greatly value their interactions with UP. However, the team heard of opportunities that were not taken up to engage closely with UP in ways that are common between universities and nearby enterprises in many other countries. Also, elements in the region may not have the levels of entrepreneurial initiative and energy that such profitable engagements require. These are important challenges for UP that require steady diplomacy, publicity and innovation, and the rector, together with other UP representatives the team met, are very aware of these. Elsewhere there is a growing practice of competitions where a small number of carefully selected new inventors/entrepreneurs are given structured advice, materials and support to bring their projects to a stage where they may be attractive to further investment. In such ways UP, with partners, could, at the very least, help to promote more entrepreneurship in the region while further advertising itself as willing and able to help regional development.

Effective institutional systems for the collection and analysis of feedback from students on the teaching they receive and, also importantly, the administration of their study programmes and their general “university experience” are important. The data obtained can help greatly in decision-making, and also satisfies accreditors and evaluators. However, such systems are of necessity rather unwieldy and the data is obtained too late for many purposes. Listening to students and their representatives is also important, especially as it facilitates dialog on issues where there is no simple remedy or a shift in general policy may be required. The team met two groups of students, members of the University Student Council and students from the Faculty of Management. In both groups, some students told of how some of their teachers asked their classes informally for their opinions on their teaching, both in general and on subjects that might need further explanation (some teachers in the US call these “muddy points”). This is good practice and should be encouraged, and facilitated by the provision of very brief guidelines on how it might best be done.

The team saw and heard much evidence that UP is fully committed to increasing internationalisation, and were encouraged by the number of cross-border opportunities that are currently being identified and explored, both at the level of the university and in the single faculty visited (Faculty of Management). In addition, the “Strategic Plan 2014–2020” (pages 21–25) lists detailed objectives and corresponding actions with respect to increasing student and staff mobility, the involvement of foreign experts, and financial inputs from the EU.

However, while “internationalisation of the curriculum” is mentioned in a “headline goal”, this is not followed up by specific objectives or actions. Overall, a short statement with respect to the part to be played by internationalisation in the realisation of UP’s overall strategic vision would have been useful.

The team notes that the 2013 SQAA re-accreditation on UP took the 2010 IEP report into account and recommended that UP commission IEP to carry out a follow-up evaluation, the result of which is the present report. The team commends SQAA on its procedure with its very strong international dimension, and on a report that is improvement-orientated and contains realistic recommendations, with a long summary section that is repeated in English translation.

3.1 Recommendations

1. UP’s present statement of vision is vague; the team advises a foresight exercise with regional and foreign inputs;
2. Establish internal audit and risk management;
3. Track alumni and establish a database of employers;
4. Continue with your commitment to expand further continuous professional development;
5. Vigorously promote fee-paying places;
6. While the team sees important advantages in a single research institute (as a full member of the university) and an associated doctoral school, it is essential that any reorganisation ensures adequate support for research and doctoral training;
7. Listen more to students; the team heard that they need more copies of books in the library and more practical training.

3.2 Envoi

It has been a special pleasure for the team to come back to the beautiful Primorska region and the dynamic University of Primorska. The team wishes you the best in your endeavours and trust that you will act to ensure a bright future for your institution and its graduates.