CZU – Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

EVALUATION REPORT

July 2022

Team:

Prof. Kerstin Norén, Chair

Prof. Brian Norton

Dr. Benoît Lesaffre

Ms Alicia Presencio Herrero

Dr. Oliver Vettori, Team Coordinator

Contents

1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of CZU, the Czech University of Life Sciences. The evaluation took place between March and May 2022, with the self-evaluation report dating from February 2022.

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 participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. 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).

The distinctive features of IEP are:

- a strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase;

- a European and international perspective;

- a peer-review approach; and

- support for improvement.

The focus of IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses on:

- decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management; and

- 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.

All aspects of the evaluation are 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?

The Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU in this report, abbreviated from "*Czech University of Agriculture*" in Czech) is located in the City of Prague (Prague-Suchdol), in the Czech Republic. The institution's history can be dated back to about 116 years ago, when the department of Agriculture was founded within the Czech Technical University by imperial decree. In its current form, the university was established in 1952 as the Czech University of Agriculture and then transferred by law in 1995 (January 1) into the Czech University of Life Sciences.

CZU is comprised of six different faculties and an additional institute: the Faculty of Agrobiology, Food and Natural Resources (FAFNR), the Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences (FFWS), the Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences (FTAS), the Faculty of Environmental Sciences (FES), the Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM), the Faculty of Engineering (FE), and the Institute of Education and Communication (IEC). The last one is comparatively small – and the only academic unit not situated at the main campus. CZU is one of the two public specialised universities of its kind in the Czech Republic, together with the Mendel University in Brno. The Faculty of Economics and Management appears to be the largest of its kind in the country. Apart from the Institute of Education and Communication, all academic units and central services are located at the same campus at Prague-Suchdol. The university also owns a farm estate at Lány, a forest establishment at Kostelec nad Cernými lesy, and a vinicultural centre at Melník-Chloumek.

Currently the university has more than 18,000 students (of which about 20% are international students) and thereby counts among the five largest universities in the Czech Republic. CZU offers over 170 accredited study programmes at BSc, MSc and PhD levels. According to the university, in 12 BSc, 24 MSc and 28 PhD programmes the language of instruction is English.

The university employs approximately 1,750 academic and administrative staff members (about 1,500 in full time equivalents), of which more than 250 are Professors or Associate Professors.

According to the self-evaluation report (SER, p.20), the "*core fields of research and development (are) Life Sciences, Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences, Technology and Engineering and Social Sciences*". The present profile of CZU as envisioned in the current strategic plan reads as follows: "*As part of its educational and creative portfolio and the impact of its activities on society, the Czech University of Life Sciences is a living example (national, European and global) of a socially responsible university, reflecting, fully accepting and implementing the principles of sustainability (its environmental, social and economic pillar in a projection into viability, justice/sustainability) expressed in the 17 United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (UN SDGs) and interconnected with the policy context of the European Green Deal*". The strong SDG focus is also mirrored in the SER and appears to provide the university with a unique profile in the Czech context, where the university is considered a leading institution with regard to sustainable development.

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by an internal team led by the Vice-Rector for Quality of Academic Activities, Assoc. Prof Petr Valášek. The team was composed of representatives from all six faculties, but also covered different roles and perspectives. To a considerable degree, the team members were recruited from the Council for Internal Evaluation and consisted of ten members:

- Assoc. Prof Petr Valášek, Vice-Rector for Quality of Academic Activities, Vice Chair of Council for Internal Evaluation, teacher of the Faculty of Engineering (Chair);

- Assoc. Prof. Ing. Jiří Remeš, Ph.D., Vice-Rector for Education, member of the Council for Internal Evaluation, Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences (Vice-Chair);

- Ing. Kateřina Černý Pixová, Ph.D., Vice-Dean for Development, Faculty of Environmental Sciences;

- Assoc. Prof. Ing. Zdeněk Aleš, Ph.D., Vice-Dean for Teaching and Learning, member of the Internal Evaluation, Faculty of Engineering;

- Ing. et Ing. Markéta Kalábová, Ph.D., Vice-Dean for Education, Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences;

- Prof. Ing. Lukáš Kalous, Ph.D., Vice-Dean for Quality Assurance, member of the Council for Internal Evaluation, Faculty of Agrobiology, Food and Natural Resources;

- Ing. Jiří Hejkrlík, Ph.D., Vice-Dean for Education and Quality, member of the Council for Internal Evaluation, Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences;

- Prof. Ing. Libuše Svatošová, CSc., Vice-Dean for Study and Education of Bachelor's Degree Studies, member of the Council for Internal Evaluation, Faculty of Economics and Management;

- Ms Petra Sedláčková, student of FES, Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing in Environmental Sciences (CIE-nominee);

- Ing. Pavel Brož, student of FE, Technology of Agricultural Technological Systems (AS CZU nominee).

According to the internal timeline provided in the SER, the team worked swiftly, compiling all data and information within three months (between November 2021 and January 2022). The report was subsequently discussed by the Council for Internal Evaluation, the Vice-Deans responsible for quality matters from all six faculties as well as the senior management team.

The SER, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in February 2022.

The team perceived the SER to be clear, compact, well-balanced and very self-critical, mapping out several areas for improvement. Interviewees appeared to be largely aware of the SER, though it was difficult to assess to what degree they were in agreement with it. The various issues, which the report

identified as issues to be tackled, will provide CZU with plenty of action points for future strategic plans and development initiatives. It would be important, though, to follow up on this SER and maybe even regularly monitor progress – in particular in the light of an IEP evaluation not being a regular mandatory external quality assurance (QA) assessment.

The visits of the evaluation team to CZU took place from 22 to 24 March and from 8 to 11 May 2022, respectively. In between the visits the university liaison provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation as requested at the end of the first visit.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the IEP-ET team or the team) consisted of:

- Prof. Kerstin Norén, former Rector of Karlstad University and University West, Sweden, team chair

- Prof. Brian Norton, former President, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland;

- Dr. Benoît Lesaffre, former Senior Vice-President, Université Paris-Est, France;

- Ms Alicia Presencio Herrero, PhD student, University of Madrid, Spain;

- Dr. Oliver Vettori, Dean Accreditations & Quality Management, WU Vienna, Austria team coordinator.

The team is most grateful for the hospitality shown by the university, as well as for the open and trusting atmosphere which characterised the entire evaluation. All the interviewees were very forthcoming with providing answers and additional information and the visits were very well and efficiently organised. The review team would especially like to thank the Rector, Petr Sklenička, for his great support and the Vice-Rector for Quality of Academic Activities, Assoc. Prof Petr Valášek, who has done a very commendable job as liaison for the IEP team.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 Strategy and institutional development

The IEP methodology uses CZU's vision and mission as starting points in reviewing what the university is trying to do. Within the Czech context, many aspects related to a university's strategy seem to be regulated by law, including the development process and format. Also by law, faculties are required to develop their own strategic plans, while keeping them in alignment with the university-wide plan. As has been described in the profile section of this report, the current strategic profile of CZU is very much geared towards sustainable development. The strong focus on societal and environmental relevance and impact can be observed throughout all six of the strategic core areas in the strategic plan, covering teaching, research and third mission activities. Although it did not become fully clear to the team how the university is able to serve all SDGs to the same extent (as seems to be suggested by the plan and the SER), or if it wishes to focus on part of them, the overall direction is evident.

The university's strong focus on sustainable development is also recognised on the national as well as international level, where the university is doing very well in sustainability-specific rankings. The team acknowledges that both the Czech Ministry for Education and the university regard rankings as a measure of success. Improving ranking positions, though, will require not only a careful analysis of indicators that can be improved, but also action plans that might not meet the approval of everyone concerned. There is a need for clear prioritisation, and the strategic plan, the university structures (see below) and the culture appear to reflect this need only to a limited degree.

As a preamble to all other observations and later recommendations, the team therefore wants to emphasise that the need for profile-defining themes and prioritisation at university level will be a key factor for success in the future – also with regard to becoming a more prominent player in the European landscape or with regard to a potential European University Alliance on Life Sciences.

CZU is characterised by a participative culture and collegiate climate. The whole organisational setup carefully balances internal interests, to ensure all key actors and power groups have their say. This even includes the Rector's Council, which is composed of five out of the six faculties – with the sixth faculty providing the Chair of the Senate. In many ways, CZU functions like a holding with (at least) six different companies under one umbrella. Within certain limitations, faculties can generate their own income and have command over their own expenses, they can pursue their own strategic goals (outlined in faculty level strategic plans as mandated by law) and are overall characterised by a high level of autonomy, which apparently is typical for the Czech higher education system. In order to keep a balance between different interests while also carefully developing the institutional identity and well-being of CZU as a whole, a great deal of time and effort are invested in meetings and committee work as well as in informal communication. Consensus is a highly valued good. This approach seems to be functional and well-accepted from the point of view of CZU, but it is also time-intensive and raises the risk of differing internal interpretations and micro-political games.

In addition, the team noticed some challenges related to this specific combination of culture and structure.

For one, the six faculties are quite different in terms of their strengths and weaknesses (for example, student numbers, research activity, international outreach). The SER names various areas where faculties are not on the same page/level. The interviews show several examples of faculty goals that in some cases might not be fully aligned with institutional goals, or also in conflict with each other. This even includes the current strategic focus to link the concept of sustainability (operationalised via the SDGs) to all university operations.

The IEP-ET therefore suggests conducting an objective and critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all faculties and developing a clear strategic plan identifying which issues need to be resolved for the sake of the institution as a whole; where faculties could help each other through increased collaboration; and where overlaps can be reduced in the long run.

This is not to say that the six faculties are all operating as individual silos. The team was presented with some interesting collaborative initiatives between faculties. Yet on closer inspection, most of them appear to rely on individual initiative, rather than on strategy. In case of dissent, there is a tendency to find workarounds (e.g., hiring specialists instead of relying on teaching provision from another department), which might not be efficient in the long run.

The team also saw efforts to bring all faculties to the same level (e.g., with regard to research output), but on a rather modest level so far, at least by international standards. It is less than clear if all major parts of the institution are indeed moving in the direction specified by CZU as a whole, or if the university is investing a great deal of energy and resources to create an umbrella for all the decentralised initiatives and ambitions. **In this regard, the team recommends strengthening the alignment of university and faculty level strategies so the faculty strategies contribute more explicitly to the overall institutional goals.** This also requires that the strategic plan is regarded as the actual map to the immediate future, which admittedly can be challenging when too many aspects are stipulated by law. In order to help the institution move forward, **CZU should consider having aligned**

quantitative goals in university and faculty strategic plans, together with specific dates targeted for their achievement.

2.3 Budget and resource allocation

About 40-50 % of the overall university budget come from the Czech government. Other main income sources are research and project funds (from companies, but also from the state and public institutions and the European Union), as well as tuition fees. The "holding-company" metaphor is certainly valid with regard to budget allocation, with faculties being rather autonomous in generating income (from the before mentioned projects and tuition fees, though they also have to contribute a certain share as "overhead" to the central budget). Within certain limits, faculties are also free to spend their "own" funds according to their specific needs and ambitions (e.g., on staff, but also on buildings and equipment).

The government-derived funds follow a specific indicator-bound methodology, which CZU aims to mirror as much as possible. In the SER, however, the university also alludes to the possibility for improvement with regard to finding a good balance between central strategies and decentral needs. With funding rules on the national level being prone to change, there is a certain level of financial risk, but the university is apparently already working at exploring additional funding lines. Overall, the team did not get the impression that the university is particularly nervous in respect of potential resource shortcomings in the next years. The mood might even be too optimistic in consideration of the recent and current turmoil which impact national economies as well as supranational funding schemes alike.

The team found the entire budget approval process to be complicated and budget allocation appears to be often delayed, sometimes up to almost half a year. The team understands that much of this is owing to the law and the government timeline, but **still advises CZU to set up a special working group that identifies possibilities to simplify and speed up budgeting processes, in line with international standards**. The university **should also ensure that rules for generating and spending income from faculties and estates support institutional priorities, e.g., by cost-efficiently sharing infrastructure and staff across faculties**.

As far as human resources are concerned, the university seems to be at once benefitting as well as suffering from the predominant decentralisation. Recruitment and staffing very much follow the priorities of the various academic units, and they appear to be quite autonomous, even though formal approval from central bodies might be required in some cases. Staff qualification and staff development are currently being prioritised by the institution, with new processes and internal regulations being discussed and implemented. Teaching workload came up repeatedly as an issue during the interviews, but the team could not find any evidence of a systematic problem there. The average class size appears to be quite small, and with no formal teaching obligations defined as part of the contracts, the actual teaching workload is very much negotiated on the level of the academic departments and could be regulated by reorganising parts of the programme portfolio.

3. Quality culture

Quality assurance at CZU is rather accreditation-driven, which is largely owing to the way the Czech quality assurance system is set up: the law stipulates that each higher education institution is expected to develop its own internal quality evaluation system, but also requires regular programme level accreditations. There is an alternative to single programme accreditations, i.e., so called institutional accreditations, but the term is a bit misleading. Institutional accreditation is not granted for the higher education institution as a whole, but always related to a specific field of studies. Higher education institutions awarded institutional accreditation within a field are authorised to approve their own study programmes within the accredited field. At the moment, CZU is accredited for seven areas of accreditation. As the hurdles are quite high (also with regard to the quality indicators that need to be achieved), obtaining institutional accreditation for additional fields can be quite challenging. Aiming for additional institutional accreditation as well as optimising the internal data management in order to reduce efforts related to the external reporting are among the key priorities for CZU regarding quality assurance. The team acknowledges the external requirements that drive quality assurance at CZU and wants to commend the university for how its quality assurance system in teaching and learning makes great use of the internal data management system. Clearly, a lot of time and effort have been invested in this.

There are a couple of relevant actors who share responsibility for supervising and developing the internal quality assurance system. The Council for Internal Evaluation is the main authority. Its composition (including academic staff and students) as well as its rules of procedure are laid out in an internal regulation. Responsibilities of the Council are mainly of a supervisory nature, approving guidelines, accreditations requests and commenting on strategic documents from a quality perspective.

Operative responsibilities lie more strongly with the Vice-Rector for Quality of Academic Activities (who is also the Co-Chair of the Council, with the Rector chairing) and the Vice-Deans, who, supported by their respective teams, have a triple role:

- supporting quality processes by providing the necessary data and information infrastructure, including excellent reports on the programme level;

- making sure that the so-called programme guarantors (i.e., a kind of academic programme directors) deal with problems indicated in the reports;

- linking these internal processes with the external accreditations.

Quality assurance on the study programme level appears to be a particular focus area (also in line with the programme focus of external quality assurance), and internal programme evaluations/revisions follow clearly defined processes and involve various stakeholder perspectives.

Responsibilities for areas other than teaching and learning are less clearly defined and organised, though, and this also shows in the respective quality assurance processes. From the perspective of the team, **it would make sense to clarify roles, responsibilities and key procedures for other areas (research, internationalisation, service to society, human resources and staff development) in due time, also in terms of accountability and concrete quality goals/standards.**

Very much in line with the organisation culture as described in the previous section, the quality culture at CZU is very much dialogue-oriented, which on the one hand is supported by the university's communication architecture with a multitude of bodies, committees and meetings. On the other hand, the team also recognised a fair share of information communication in parallel to the "official" processes and structures. This can also be observed in the way the university deals with student issues. Overall, the system is heavily reliant on student feedback. But formal feedback obtained via the official questionnaires appears to be often low in terms of numbers, and does not necessarily indicate the root of potential problems, i.e., it needs to be interpreted and can be misleading. On the same matter, the team was often referred to the possibility for students to use a more "direct" channel, and approach academic staff and decision makers personally.

Examples from the student interviews on longer existing problems not tackled, however, raise a number of questions. First of all, what if problems are not reported by students (also with respect to the lack of student representative roles as mentioned in the next section)? How is it ensured that underlying problems are dealt with, in particular, if the person who is the subject of the feedback cannot or will not solve them? From the point of view of the team, the effectiveness of any quality assurance system is evidenced by how well it is able to close the loop. The team therefore **perceives a need for setting clear minimum standards oriented toward CZU's priorities in teaching and learning, and for monitoring instruments and processes that allow the institution to supervise this effectively.** Student representatives need to be a part of this process.

Last but not least, there are many differences between faculties in terms of quality processes and culture, which mirror the overall culture of diversity as described in the previous section. The faculties also boast an impressive array of good practices related to a great variety of issues, but those good practices appear to be little known beyond the faculty borders and therefore cannot instil organisational learning or initiate standards such as mentioned above. Information should not stop with the borders of a faculty and be more freely available in line with standard 1.8 of the European Standards & Guidelines for Quality Assurance. The team sees first elements in place, such as the so-called "Panels" as described in the Procedures on internal evaluation of study programs and leadership meetings across faculties, but **encourages CZU to also consider more and more effective ways of enabling faculties to systematically exchange experiences and lessons learned, and maybe also to document the most effective practices in order to provide inspiration and initiate university-wide standards.** Exploring alternative feedback procedures as used by some faculties might be a good starting point, making sure that all students have an inclusive and protected way of providing their viewpoints and ensuring follow-up activities.

4. Teaching and learning

CZU offers programmes on all three levels, bachelors, masters and PhD in about 15 areas of education/study fields, including: agriculture, food science, veterinary disciplines, forestry and wood processing, environmental protection, ecology and the use of renewable resources, and disciplines such as: business and economics (to an uncommonly large degree), computer science, technology, engineering and materials or social sciences. For seven of these areas of education CZU has obtained institutional accreditation, giving the university the right to start its own programmes without the need for external approval.

The processes for starting and revising a new study programme are rather clearly defined and publicly available. The processes involve various actors and committees. From an external observer's point of view, however, bottom-up initiatives seem to dominate and the criteria for opening, revising or closing a programme are not fully clear. With about 180 accredited study programmes, CZU features a very comprehensive programme portfolio, considering that with approximately 18,000 students the university would be rather medium-sized by international standards. Maintaining such a big portfolio – with partly overlapping offers – seems costly and the links to the overall strategy are difficult to trace in some parts. With an eye to the future, the comprehensive portfolio might pose a challenge within an increasingly dynamic higher education landscape. Most likely, not all of the programmes can be sustained mid- to long term, not least due to the need for resources and demographically decreased student demand.

The growing discourse on 21st century skills further suggests that many contemporary challenges will require interdisciplinary, holistic approaches – and even though CZU seems to be in a great position to move in this direction, regarding its profile and strategic ambitions, the current programme portfolio largely appears more like a collection of loosely coupled silos. There is some unexplored potential in organising programmes (cohort size, class size, workload distribution) so that they optimise the students' learning experience. But this will also mean dealing with inherent goal conflicts (extra income versus safeguarding time for R&D; individual versus institutional interests) and developing a clear strategy for the programme portfolio. **The team thus advises the university to revise the entire portfolio from a university-wide perspective in the light of changing needs, and revisit criteria and procedures for continuing a programme, closing a programme and opening a new programme.**

Students are involved in lots of different ways in the university and organised in different associations and bodies, most of which, though, appear to be contributing to the students' "study experience", e.g., by organising student events, or by contributing to sustainability-oriented initiatives. When looking into the issue of the formal representation of the students' voice, the team perceived a lack of actual student representative roles and structures beyond the Senate level. This seems to be well in line with legal requirements, but also leaves students somewhat vulnerable and puts even more responsibility on the university itself to safeguard students' rights and interests. The team finds **that investing in a formalised system of student-led persons of trust, following the model pioneered by student ambassadors in one faculty, could help in achieving this goal.**

This is not to say that the team encountered lots of issues regarding student experience. On the contrary, students overall seem satisfied and appreciate the openness regarding their feedback and needs. There are plenty of well-maintained campus facilities for students, and academic staff in general seemed dedicated to their teaching. But the team also noticed a considerable dropout rate and reports of students' concerns not leading to discernible follow up actions. Given that many services are organised on the faculty level, and academic management positions appear to be part-time across the university (with even members of the Rector's Council having quite a heavy teaching workload), **it might be advisable to invest in professional services monitoring student progression, failure rates, dropout and low activity levels, in order to support the academics-led work of course and programme guarantors.**

In terms of frameworks, the team found a strong focus on regulations and rules, not only in the area of teaching and learning, but particularly there. Regulations (e.g., regarding assessment) are clearly defined and their development process involves various stakeholders with checks and balances. **Yet there is also a need for softer yet still well-communicated policies that guide teaching and learning without setting legal parameters, but rather communicate expectations, create shared quality standards and ease the burden on all actors who need to negotiate individual problems.** Such policies might be particularly valuable for staff development in teaching and learning, which is not compulsory. Finding stronger incentives for teachers to participate or explicitly linking trainings to innovation efforts will help CZU achieve a more balanced overall level of teaching quality and also help in attracting international students – and ultimately staff.

Pedagogy and didactics might be another area where explicit policies could help. Mirroring the broad range of disciplines, the approaches to teaching are quite diverse – and very often a matter of personal preference and individual know-how. The team and students alike perceive a quite strong reliance on lectures and inputs, as well as written and oral exams (even in practice-oriented areas). Digitalisation plays a role, but only cautiously so, and the hybrid-philosophy developed during the COVID-19 phases helped the university to cope with the situation but seems, as of yet, more geared to dealing with similar phases of (partial) lock-down rather than seizing the opportunity to rethink education.

The SER alludes to tentative considerations in this direction and the team wants to strongly encourage CZU **to develop a university-wide teaching and learning policy derived from the university's strategic goals and aligned with environmental expectations and needs.** Such a policy might also translate into diversifying learning formats and assessment schemes, not least with regard to responding to post-pandemic effects on students' learning habits and preferences and changes in the higher education landscape at large. Pedagogically, the principle of student-centred learning should be featured more strongly in the future educational setup.

5. Research

CZU aims for excellent research outcomes along its entire disciplinary spectrum, which according to the SER mainly includes earth sciences, life sciences, environmental sciences, forestry, agriculture and socio-economic disciplines. Another key feature of CZU's research orientation is its SDG focus, mirroring the university's ambition to make significant contributions to contemporary challenges, namely addressing the impact of the global climate change in the Czech Republic and in the region. The university managed a considerable increase of publications included in Web of Science Database, with some researchers being recognised as international authorities in their respective fields.

The team acknowledges that there are some areas where CZU is internationally competitive with regard to research output and impact. It applauds the university's ambition to build on this and further increase its research output and quality across the entire institution. There are, however, also considerable differences across the university, as acknowledged by all interview partners. These differences are apparent on the meso-level of the different faculties, but also within the faculties, i.e., between different departments.

The team learned that the university is well aware of these differences and that considerable progress was achieved in the last couple of years in order to bring all academic units up to a certain level. The new incentive systems targeting disciplines rather than being channelled through the faculties seem a particularly promising idea in this regard. However, the team finds **that strongly urging all faculties to take more responsibility for achieving a consistent level of research output across the university and collaborate more closely is essential.** Cross-faculty research centres, target agreements between the senior management (on university and faculty level) and the academic units, added financial incentives and university-wide policies are just some potential building blocks of such a coordinated effort. As a starting point, the IEP-ET maintains that research could/should play an even stronger role in the overall strategic plan, as research output is key to achieving the goal of becoming more visible on the international stage. The current strategic plan contains many important considerations and declarations of intent, but few concrete targets and specific measures. Clearly the team believes **that identifying national and European research partners, establishing stable research networks and alliances, and defining an action plan for developing European projects could be core elements featured strongly in a revised research strategy.** This would also form a natural link between the university's research and internationalisation ambitions.

PhD students are key to the future of the university's research – as are strategic recruitment efforts. This is well mirrored in the current strategic plan, where the aim to develop and offer "effective, very high-quality, international and responsible PhD studies" is even considered a key strategic area. Both the strategic plan and the SER also allude to the fact that the entire Czech system is struggling with a long duration of study, high dropout rates and general issues regarding effectiveness and efficiency. The team understands the difficulties spinning out of national policies and PhD funding schemes and appreciates the efforts of CZU to compensate for some of them. But in order to make this more efficient and lower the incredibly high dropout rates (by international standards), **it is recommended that all key actors in the university work together on this, and maybe also devise a central structure and overarching policy on quality standards, supervision and support in all doctoral programmes across the university.**

On a related subject, the team also realised – and this is true for many other areas of operations as well – that several research support activities are devised and managed by academics as a part-time function in addition to research and teaching. **Extending and professionalising support services might not only ease the burden on those academics, but also ensure continuation in the light of fluctuating key positions.** The team therefore advises the university to consider investing in this area. Such an approach might also benefit CZU's institutional ambitions towards more effective research communication.

Last but not least, **making research a bigger part of the education across curricula (e.g., student conferences, research lab formats) will not only support the creation of a new research culture but also provide a competence profile for future employability**. The university's excellent facilities will be of great benefit in this regard, as will the research-driven and motivated academic staff the team has met in many of its meetings.

6. Service to society

The team explicitly commends CZU for its strong orientation toward the SDGs in its vision and plans for the future. This is particularly visible in the new strategic plan, which emphasises relevance and societal impact in basically all areas, including the management of the university. The university also impressively "leads by example", as evidenced by its efforts regarding sustainable technologies and environmentally responsible green campus operations. The IEP-ET also wants to positively mention activities such as the third age university courses and additional support offers offered by the Institute of Education and Communication.

The external partners whom the team met were only reflecting the "societal outreach orientation" to a small degree, prompting the question as to which partners will be essential in making these plans a reality. In a way, this adds to the excellent analysis in the SER, where the university itself states a gap between its ambitions to serve society and the actual impact it has (also by way of technology transfer) or the way it is perceived by the greater public. Changing the role of the university (in the country and in the region) and positioning it as a clear champion of sustainable development beyond recognition in the form of rankings will require a considerable investment, not least in the mindset of the academic staff, as not everyone in the interviews was embracing this vision wholeheartedly.

One major starting point for improving the university's interface with society is, certainly, a more systematic dialogue with key stakeholders. All faculties apparently already have boards for collaboration with practitioners, comprising their most relevant stakeholders, which the team appreciates as a coordinated and effective way of including external needs and perspectives. External input, however, is still underused, both on the programme level as well as on the institutional level. The team therefore **advises CZU to increase its efforts of strategic stakeholder management on the institutional level, also in light of the university's goals regarding societal welfare and environmental protection, not just in terms of the need for external funds**. Establishing a high-profile board for future-oriented collaboration with practitioners (and beyond the International Advisory Board) at university level might be a good first step.

The team also finds that **relationship management with all graduates beyond the current alumni club activities will be a great investment in the future, also in terms of diversifying income**. To the team's surprise, alumni management is one of the few completely centralised areas at the university, which underestimates the potential of community building among recent graduates within their areas of expertise. Faculties, student associations and the bigger programmes should therefore be consulted or actively involved in broadening the scope of alumni activities. **Making alumni surveys a few years after graduation or alternative ways of getting regular feedback from early, mid- and late career alumni a regular part of the QA system will also contribute to better understanding alumni needs.**

Another clear area of improvement by international standards is gender-balance and diversity management. Leadership teams on the university level as well as across faculties were predominantly male, many of them sharing the same background, apart from disciplinary differences. CZU has issued on 18 December 2021 its "Gender Equality Plan" (GEP) and there are apparently ongoing discussions in the university regarding gender equality policy, but at the moment not many actions appear to be directed at improving the situation. The team **recommends making gender and diversity a priority, which would also fit well into the university's SDG focus, and establishing a strong follow-up of its GEP**. Last but not least, the team wants to raise the issue of engaging with society, that is, understanding what society needs from the university and, conversely, how the university's already

existing efforts in this direction can be more persuasively communicated back to society. There are some first steps taken in this direction, but there is still quite some room for improvement, which is not limited to the issue of knowledge transfer featured prominently in the SER. There are many interesting initiatives at other international higher education institutions from which to draw, in areas such as explicit third mission strategies, impact monitoring, citizen science or sustainability centres specifically conceptualised as encounter zones between academia and other segments of society.

7. Internationalisation

Internationalisation, in particular becoming more visible within the global higher education arena, is one of CZU's key ambitions. There seems to be a clear commitment to internationalisation, based on the idea of a bilingual university, even though staff and students still appear to perceive internationalisation as an "add-on" rather than an integrated part of their social and academic environment. By national standards, CZU is doing fairly well regarding its share of international students. With more than 3,800 students from abroad, CZU features the fourth-largest international student community within the Czech Republic. By international standards, there is still room for improvement, even though the PRT sees clear progress. Internationality of staff is even more of an area for development, as the vast majority of teachers and researchers seem to have been educated in a Czech university, if not even at CZU itself. A new internationalisation strategy, which is currently in its final stages of development, will tackle this issue, among others.

Bilingualism in all operations and processes of the university is at the core of the new internationalisation strategy. Recruitment of international faculty and students will benefit from the strategy – but will also be its major driver, if given priority. Defining and marketing the strengths of CZU as an institution (through the eyes of an international audience) needs to be a part of this. **The team therefore wants to encourage the university to develop a comprehensive international marketing and positioning strategy**, going beyond brand management and advertisement, and aimed specifically at attracting international staff (academic and administrative) and students.

According to the SER, an external review organised by the Czech Ministry of Education in 2020, found many positive things, but also plenty of difficulties related to outgoing mobility and credit recognition. This was mirrored by the team's own observations, with students reporting tedious and overly complicated bureaucratic processes regarding credit transfers after returning from abroad. The situation is not made easier by several obstacles related to the recent changes in the ERASMUS scheme on the European and national level (e.g., switching to ERASMUS Without Paper, less funds per capita) which cannot easily be overcome by CZU on its own. The team therefore thinks **CZU should explore alternative ways of helping students develop a much needed "international mindset", for example through short programmes, international classroom at home approaches, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses, as well as scholarships awarded by external partners/companies to help students financially.**

For each of these alternatives, though, it will first be necessary to clarify how students are supposed to benefit from it and how this can be inserted into the various curricula. Creating dependable and stable mobility windows for almost 180 programmes is quite an endeavour and this might well lead to a diversified, yet directed approach across the portfolio. Simplifying administrative processes and making them more "customer"-friendly will also be necessary in order to convince students on a larger scale that a semester abroad is not a personal luxury and will be particularly important in light of CZU's ambitions to become part of a European University Alliance in the near future.

The team explicitly wants to applaud the university for its plans in this regard, in particular as there is currently no European University Alliance focussing on life sciences and agricultural issues. International networks are not least regarded as a means of helping the institution to gain visibility. Becoming part of such an alliance will also provide the university with the opportunity to explore

international partnership models beyond student and faculty mobility. Strategic partnerships, more joint and double degree programmes, as well as international research collaborations will all help to bring the university forward. There is, however, also the complementary necessity to build structures and processes which support such endeavours.

Presently, the university is already developing its capacity for obtaining European project/research funds and for handling them. In parts, this initiative is set up on the university level, which seems like a good way forward. However, **taking an even more strategic long-term approach to making the university a stronger player in European research programmes is strongly recommended.**

8. Conclusion

Summing up, the team wants to again commend CZU on its reflective culture and self-awareness as well as the university's impressive achievements, particularly in the last years. This is even more impressive considering that these are quite turbulent times for the university: the COVID-19 pandemic, the fallout from the war in Ukraine and the current economic outlook, are just a few of the external factors requiring immediate and effective reactions.

As has been mentioned before, the team found a climate of generous cooperation and open-mindedness, which is an important foundation for CZU's successful development. The team also saw an attractive campus with modern facilities, much appreciated by staff and students, and a strong socio-ecological orientation pervading most of the university's core operative processes and driving innovation. The people working at CZU appear to be engaged and ambitious and rightfully proud of their university.

This individual drive can also be seen in a vast array of projects, innovation and activities: the culture at CZU is very much one of bottom-up ideas and initiatives with all the benefits and disadvantages this brings about. There are numerous endeavours which are not included in the strategic plan or the annual action plans, but seem nevertheless important to the institution or at least parts of the institution. This per se is not a problem, but the team also sees the various costs these different initiatives are incurring (in actual money, but also staff time and opportunity cost), and how prioritisation, digitalisation and – as has been mentioned several times in the report – common university-wide policies and procedures will be necessary core elements of CZU'S way forward.

This seems even more important in light of the uncertainties we are all facing. Mitigating the risks of a world characterised by many as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, as well as seizing opportunities, will require cultural changes that might affect some of the university's traditional strengths. Climate change, rapid technological development, rising inflation, increasing international competition and demographic changes are just some of the challenges the team wants to point out. It is always easier to manage in an era of plenitude. The real tests for organisations and their leadership are in the biblical "lean years".

Overall, though, the team is confident that the university will be able to find the energy necessary to face the challenges and keep its spirit to continuously improve. In the word of one interviewee: we also see the "will to modernise" at the university and in particular on the leadership level. The SER report will be a helpful cornerstone on this road towards a more consolidated, internationally highly recognized university, as it already clearly maps out several areas for improvement. The team can only encourage the university to follow up on this quickly, also linking the key findings to future strategic plans and action plans.

The recommendations provided by the team will hopefully also contribute to the university's development process. These recommendations are:

- to conduct an objective and critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all faculties and to develop a clear strategic plan to identify which issues need to be resolved for the sake of the institution as a whole; where faculties could help each other through increased collaboration; and where overlaps can be reduced in the long run;

- to strengthen the alignment of university and faculty level strategies so the faculty strategies contribute more explicitly to the overall institutional goals;

- to have aligned quantitative goals in both university and faculty strategic plans, together with specific dates targeted for their achievement;

- to set up a special working group that identifies possibilities to simplify and speed up budgeting processes, in line with international standards;

- to ensure that rules for generating and spending income from faculties and estates support institutional priorities, e.g., by cost-efficiently sharing infrastructure and staff across faculties;

- to clarify roles, responsibilities and key procedures for other areas (research, internationalisation, service to society, human resources and staff development) in due time, also in terms of accountability and concrete quality goals/standards;

- to set clear minimum standards oriented toward CZU's priorities in teaching and learning and for monitoring instruments and processes that allow the institution to supervise this effectively;

- to enable faculties more effectively to systematically exchange experiences and lessons learned, and maybe also to document the most effective practices in order to provide inspiration and initiate university-wide standards;

- to revise the entire portfolio from a university-wide perspective in the light of changing needs, and revisit criteria and procedures for continuing a programme, closing a programme and opening a new programme;

- to build a formalised system of student-led persons of trust, following the model pioneered by student ambassadors in one faculty, which could help in achieving this goal;

- to invest in professional services monitoring student progression, failure rates and dropout and low activity levels, in order to support the academics-led work of course and programme guarantors;

- to develop policies that guide teaching and learning without setting legal parameters, but rather communicate expectations, create shared quality standards and ease the burden on all actors who need to negotiate individual problems;

- to develop a university-wide teaching and learning policy derived from the university's strategic goals and aligned with environmental expectations and needs;

- to strongly urge all faculties to take more responsibility for achieving a consistent level of research output across the university and collaborate more closely;

- to identify national and European research partners, establish stable research networks and alliances, and define an action plan for developing European projects in a revised research strategy;

- to devise a central structure and overarching policy on quality standards, supervision and support in all doctoral programmes across the university;

- to extend and professionalise support services in research;

- to make research a bigger part of the education across curricula (e.g., student conferences, research lab formats);

- to increase efforts of strategic stakeholder management on the institutional level, also in light of the university's goals regarding societal welfare and environmental protection, not just in terms of the need for external funds;

- to invest in relationship management with all graduates beyond the current alumni club activities;

- to make alumni surveys a few years after graduation or alternative ways of getting regular feedback from early, mid- and late career alumni a regular part of the QA system will contribute to better understanding alumni needs;

- to make gender and diversity a priority, which would also fit well into the university's SDG focus, and to establish a strong follow-up of the Gender Equality Plan;

- to develop a comprehensive international marketing and positioning strategy;

- to explore alternative ways of helping students develop a much needed "international mindset", for example through short programmes, international classroom at home approaches, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses, as well as scholarships awarded by external partners/companies to help students financially;

- to take an even more strategic long-term approach to making the university a stronger player in international research programmes.