

FACULTY OF INFORMATION STUDIES NOVO MESTO

EVALUATION REPORT

February 2015

Team:

Jürgen Kohler, Chair

Hans Beunderman

Asnate Kažoka

Gregory Clark, Team Coordinator

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the Faculty of Information Studies Novo Mesto. The evaluation took place in November 2014 and February 2015 at the request of the faculty. The dean especially welcomed the opportunity for the faculty to benchmark against broader, international reference points.

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 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 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 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 the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 Faculty of Information Studies Novo Mesto’s profile

The faculty was established by act of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia in June 2008, first enrolling students at undergraduate and Masters levels, from the start of academic session 2008-2009 and at research degree level from the start of academic session 2012-2013. The faculty has grown in that time from a total of about 120 to about 250 students. The faculty has 25 employed academic staff, a further 26 contracted academic staff and eight employed professional services staff.

The faculty is situated in Novo Mesto, the administrative capital of the south-eastern region of Slovenia. Its local economy includes services (such as tourism), industry (including pharmaceuticals, car manufacturing and the construction of trailers and camper vans) and some agriculture. The regional population is around 140,000 inhabitants with about 24,000 in Novo Mesto itself. The faculty reported the unemployment rates to be around 20% in the region and around 12% in Novo Mesto.

The faculty is a non-profit, publicly funded higher education institution. It is independent of existing Slovenian universities and its awards are accredited by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The faculty will soon complete its current strategic plan 2009-2014 and is formulating a new six-year strategic plan. The 2009-2014 strategic plan describes its mission as:

we help shape the science and the profession in the field of information studies. By virtue of the constant exchange and transfer of knowledge, we are increasing the knowledge level of society in order to improve the quality of life and the competitiveness of the region, the country and Europe as a whole.

The new 2015-2020 strategic plan combines the mission and vision as: “we are an academic institution, which synthesises the social sciences, IT and computer knowledge. We contribute through education, teaching and research at the highest level. In 2020 we will be comparable with the reputable academic institutions in South Eastern Europe.”

The 2009-2014 strategic plan states the following to be the strategic orientation of the faculty:

- excellence in scientific research and development
- excellence in education
- excellence in business activities
- student satisfaction
- research and development activity client satisfaction
- employee satisfaction
- socially responsible activity

In addition, the faculty operates in the strategic context of the foundation by the Novo Mesto Local Authority of “the University and Research Centre Novo Mesto”, which was established in 2006 with the brief of working towards the establishment of a University of Novo Mesto formed from the faculty, two further private faculties (organisational studies and industrial engineering) and a private high school (rural management) with accredited higher education programmes.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a working group composed of two academic staff, three professional services staff and one student. However, there were no members of the faculty’s senior management team, for example, the vice-deans, in the working group. Nevertheless, the dean and the vice-deans were individually interviewed by the working

group. The working group was chaired by a senior academic and its membership was confirmed by the faculty's Senate in May 2014.

The working group operated on the initial self-evaluation report between June and September 2014 and worked in co-operation with the faculty's leadership and the Student Council and informally consulted the faculty's academic and professional services staff. Engagement with contracted academic staff had however been limited. The working group drafted a SWOT analysis and gathered existing data for further analysis despite having to operate during the faculty's summer vacation. Indeed the faculty affirmed that the timing of the production of the report had not permitted its formal consideration by the Governing Board, Senate or Academic Assembly. Similarly, although the report had been discussed within the Student Council chair, it had not been formally considered by the Student Council. However, the faculty advised that, in a very small institution, informal lines of communication and consultation, such as direct e-mail, worked effectively.

The self-evaluation report itself was concise and indeed self-critical and frank, but did not offer great depth in terms of reflection and analysis. Supplementary appendices were provided to support the report and the evaluation team received a positive response to its request to supply other additional documentation before and after the first visit. The faculty translated what it viewed as key documentation or extracts from documentation into English and was very positive in its response to additional translation requests from the evaluation team in preparation for the second visit. Overall, due to language reasons and the scope of translation, the evaluation team inevitably operated on the basis of a somewhat limited range of documentary evidence.

The report and appendices were sent to the evaluation team electronically and in hard copy in good time before its two respective visits on 9-11 November 2014 and 1-3 February 2015. The faculty also took the opportunity between the two visits to produce an updated version of the original self-evaluation report with minor amendments and clarifications. All meetings were conducted in the English language without need of interpretation.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) was composed of:

- Jürgen Kohler, former Rector, Greifswald University, Germany, team chair
- Hans Beunderman, former Vice-Rector, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands
- Asnate Kažoka, Student, Riga Technical University, Latvia
- Gregory Clark, former Associate Secretary, University of Salford, United Kingdom, Team Coordinator.

The team thanks the Dean, Professor Nadja Damij, and all the staff and students of the faculty for their engagement in the evaluation process and, in particular, Ms Barbara Pavlakovič, for her supportive and helpful contribution to the evaluation process as institutional contact person.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The team took note of various constraints outside the scope and responsibility of the faculty which hamper institutional development. Such constraints were legal and financial but also of a general societal nature.

The legal/regulatory constraints included: regulations which prevented increased inter-disciplinarity at undergraduate level; relatively high class contact hours (which necessarily mitigated against a more student-centred and self-reliant approach to learning); somewhat over extensive reassessment opportunities; specific requirements for delivery in the Slovenian language; possibly undue open admissions policies including the right of admission into the Masters programme from the professional undergraduate programme; lack of institutional discretion on the transfer of state funding; restriction on appointments of permanent staff as these were regarded as state employees, and therefore subject to a national embargo on appointment in response to the Europe-wide economic recession; and restrictions in relation to academic structure, including certain named senior posts.

The other external constraints included the demographic downturn, changing student demand and the difficulty for Novo Mesto to compete with neighbouring larger capital cities in attractiveness to students, the unpredictability of the general and higher education economic environments and the decline in national funding for research.

It is in the light of these constraints, over which the faculty had little control, that the following observations must be seen. These observations relate to: (a) teaching offers; (b) corporate and academic governance arrangements; (c) strategic planning and transformation; (d) resources in terms of funding and staff; and (e) a specific view on the concept of the aspiration to establish “the University of Novo Mesto”.

(a) With regard to study programmes, the faculty has so far delivered provision in only one subject, Informatics in Contemporary Society, at undergraduate level (via professional and academic streams) at Masters level and as a doctoral study programme. However, as from the 2015-2016 academic year, the faculty will add a further professional undergraduate programme to its portfolio in computer science and web technologies and the self-evaluation report states an intention to delegate certain functions to departmental level. When that statement in the self-evaluation report was raised by the team in meetings with faculty staff, it was advised that the faculty is considering how a wider programme portfolio might impact on its academic structure. However, when requested for evidence of formal consideration of such delegation, the team was informed that in fact no progress had been made beyond the early and informal discussion of possibilities. The faculty advised that Slovenian legislation prevented the establishment of co-terminus teaching and units which might otherwise have presented the faculty with an opportunity for greater simplification even if not greater delegation.

(b) The faculty’s corporate and academic governance arrangements are set out in its Statute. However, the team observed from the description given in the self-evaluation report and in

discussion with staff, that not all points of the statute were fully implemented or observed. Academic staff contributes via a matrix arrangement to the delivery of the four current programmes. Oversight of the taught programmes falls to the vice-dean for education and of the research programme to the vice-dean for research activities. Although the team believes that this arrangement of programme responsibilities suffices at present due to the small number of study programmes, all of which essentially centre around the same topical area, and that an additional programme might still be accommodated within the existing matrix arrangement, the faculty might wish to consider strengthening programme leadership and management by identifying a programme director or similar role for each programme, especially in the event of launching new programme(s). Otherwise there was a risk that the quality assurance of taught programmes might not receive adequate attention, falling between a weak cathedra and higher level consideration by Senate.

The faculty's Statute states that executive management is provided by the dean, three vice-deans (for education, research activities, and quality) and a faculty secretary as head of professional services staff. The dean is elected for a two-year term of office and the former dean had served the maximum three terms of office from the faculty's establishment to the end of the 2013-14 academic session. Financial and other pressures had meant that the roles of a vice-dean for quality and faculty secretary were vacant and functions falling to those roles had effectively been taken up by the former dean during his time in office. This undoubtedly expanded the dean's workload significantly and, as recognised by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, caused a potential conflict of interest whereby the dean was responsible for the delivery of the faculty's strategic and operational plans as well as responsible for reporting on the extent to which that delivery had been successful. A new dean had been appointed, following a contested election, and she had subsequently appointed a new team of vice-deans including a vice-dean for quality. The faculty secretary post remains vacant.

The team was unsure, even after discussion with members of the senior management team, how the role of vice-dean for quality interacted with the other two vice-deans and especially the vice-dean for education. In part, this may be a facet of the discharge by the vice-dean for education of the main programme management responsibilities for taught programmes. During the second visit the team was advised that the vice-dean for quality, who was a part-time senior academic formerly employed at a neighbouring university, had taken on a miscellaneous range of tasks including assistance in formulating the new strategic plan, annual staff appraisals on behalf of the dean, the compilation of the faculty's annual self-evaluation report and oversight of national returns and reports. However, even senior faculty staff remained unclear about the post's formal remit and its relationship with the remits of the other vice-deans, and especially the vice-dean for education. As and when the faculty does reconsider its arrangements for programme leadership and management, it might simultaneously wish to consider a clearer articulation of the differentiation of the role of vice-dean for quality from the other vice-deans, re-addressing the remits of the vice-deans might, for instance, entail the vice-dean for education taking full responsibility for quality matters in teaching and learning. The vice dean for research activities might take on full

responsibility for quality assurance in research matters. In effect, the remit of the vice-dean for quality might shift towards, and be limited to, overarching quality issues, and amongst these particularly those related to institutional management and governance, external partnering, alumni relations and similar areas of activity.

The Senate is the faculty's supreme academic body and comprises at least nine elected academic staff, three elected students and, ex officio, the dean and vice-deans. The Senate is chaired by the dean. The Senate meets regularly and may discharge its functions via its committees of which there are five, including study affairs and the affairs of students, scientific research work and quality and evaluations.

The Governing Board provides the faculty's corporate governance and meets about once a month as required. It comprises three representatives of the founding entity (effectively central and local government representatives or officers), four faculty staff (three academic and one professional service), a student and an employer representative nominated by the regional Chambers of Commerce. The Statute provides for the possible cross-membership of the Governing Board and the Senate but non-Senate members of the Governing Board would always have a majority to prevent any adverse conflict of interest. The respective appointing bodies to the different categories of the Governing Board membership may replace those members before the expiry of a term of office. The dean attends the Governing Board but has no voting right. Other faculty officers, such as the head of finance, may be invited to attend. The team met the vice-president of the Governing Board, who is also a member of staff, to discuss the effectiveness of its operation and its relationship with the Senate. The reversal of a decision on the venue for the faculty's physical relocation was cited as an example of the good working relationship with the Senate and the Governing Board's retention of the ultimate decision on non-academic matters.

The Statute is designed to provide appropriate checks and balances between the powers and authority of the Governing Board, Senate and dean. The team identified the potential for conflict or even impasse between the respective parties but was assured that all parties were realistic and aware of the need for coordinated working. For example, academic staff were aware that any new academic initiative could only be carried through if the Governing Board were prepared to resource it adequately. This coordinated working was facilitated by a good level of cross-membership. The team recognised an appropriate level of student membership in the Governing Board and Senate and its committees. However, given the fact that the faculty's advisory employer body, the Board of Trustees, was no longer convened, the team wondered whether a single employer representative on the Governing Board was sufficient to obtain employer input into the strategic governance of the faculty.

The team also noted the other organisational bodies provided for by the Statute, including the Academic Assembly (a formal staff consultative body that met occasionally), the Student Council and the other organisational units provided for by the Statute including the dean's office (effectively the senior management team and professional services units) and the doctoral school. At the team's request the faculty produced a revised organogram intended to set out clearly these arrangements. However this did not adequately reflect the respective

responsibilities and reporting lines of the organisational bodies in the Statute, perhaps suggesting some lack of clarity within the faculty itself on their operation. The team felt that it would be in the best interest of the faculty to rectify the organogram so that its internal organisation and structural *modus operandi* were clearly understood and communicated, both internally and externally.

The faculty's professional services are still overseen by the dean although she intends to encourage them to become more self-managing and self-motivated. She is also seeking to establish cover arrangements so that there is decreased vulnerability to the adverse impact of any staff absence. The professional services units are all single person units delivering basic administrative and student support services. The units concentrate mainly on administering processes and maintaining statistical, financial and other support information without any strong advisory function in relation to strategic decision-making. Professional services staff report the services to be overburdened, in part because they also provide administrative support for funded research projects. Moreover, staff feel that reporting lines are not fully clear in all respects at all times. They believe that the absence of a faculty secretary means that they are subject to a range of competing demands from a number of commissioners of work. Essentially, a faculty secretary, who should be both competent in administration and in supporting planning in a strong consultative capacity, is an asset from which the faculty could benefit, serving as an intermediary between the academic and the administrative spheres.

(c) With regard to strategic planning and the process underpinning the development of the Strategic Plan 2009 – 2014, which was relevant at the time of drafting the self-evaluation report, the team learned in meetings with the senior management that there had been a broad consultative process used to generate the Strategic Plan. It was felt that this process had perhaps generated too broad a range of ideas, had been very time-consuming and meeting-based and had perhaps produced too exhaustive a set of key performance indicators to be monitored.

In terms of basic assumptions and key content of strategic planning, the faculty's Strategic Plan 2009-2014, the self-evaluation report and discussions with staff, revealed to the team that the faculty had a sound grasp of the strategic challenges facing higher education in Slovenia and of the strategic challenges facing the faculty (unstable financing and lack of reserves, low national and international profile, limited physical estate). The team also noted the faculty's arrangements for monitoring achievement of the Strategic Plan through annual operational plans monitored by annual reports to Senate and to the Governing Board.

Theoretically, a series of spreadsheets, set out in the faculty's "Rules of procedure for quality", identified detailed strategic goals and quantifiable key performance indicators. The rules are also identified in a responsibility matrix, the locus of responsibility for the achievement of those strategic goals. The level of achievement attained was described as consequently informing actions to be included in the operational plan for the following year. In fact, when the team sought and obtained a sample extract from the current draft annual monitoring report, it was noted that certain strategic goals had been deferred to "a later, more convenient, time" and that some strategic goals had been concluded to be "not suitable

or impracticable". Moreover, in discussions with staff and in the self-evaluation report, there was an acknowledgement that the level of profile originally sought in the faculty's original vision might be over-aspirational and that current staff, including professional services staff, might be too over-burdened to carry through the full strategic monitoring arrangements prescribed.

The senior management team was confident that the faculty was open to change, shared a common interest in taking the faculty forward and could maximise the efforts of a mainly youthful and dynamic staff, particularly by interdisciplinary working. Two current research projects were cited which had been deliberately structured so as to engage staff from each of the faculty's research units. They believed that incremental improvement in the level and quality of new undergraduate and Masters students, both Slovenian and international, could follow from improved links with local secondary schools and especially their careers counsellors, targeted recruitment on either side of the nearby Croatian/Slovenian border and moving towards approval of increased delivery of provision in the English language. The faculty was hoping to draw some personnel from a trial group of five local companies to improve engagement and as a precursor to a potentially broader programme.

However, the team was not clear about how the faculty proposed to address the more strategic choices it faced. The faculty had identified these in the SWOT analysis, in the self-evaluation report and in meetings with the team but had not focused upon which strategic options were favoured or, at least, how such strategic options would be chosen. For example, the team discussed five major strategic options where they were unclear whether the faculty was "backing both horses" and if so, how conflicting objectives might be reconciled in terms of a coherent strategic design:

- whether the faculty's focus was regional or international;
- whether the faculty's focus was technical information technology (IT) or a more social sciences-oriented IT;
- whether the faculty's focus was academic or professional;
- whether the faculty's focus was research or teaching;
- whether the faculty's research was predominantly fundamental, science-based; research or more applied, consultancy-driven, research.

The team acknowledged that such focus need not be mutually exclusive. For example, greater use of the English language in delivery might attract not only international students but also higher quality regional and national students. Again, the faculty had emphasised its market niche as an integrator of social sciences and IT but its most major recent capital investment had been in a super-computer. The question could be posed whether this would favour the technical over the softer, more integrative, IT. The faculty offered two undergraduate streams but some staff and students viewed the differentiation of the two streams as minimal and more related to tailoring provision to available funding and the availability of a particular clientele for different modes of attendance. Indeed some students in the academic stream, whilst welcoming the slightly broader choice of elective modules, regretted the more limited opportunity for work placement than in the professional stream.

Finally, whilst understanding the faculty's desire to increase funding by expanding its involvement in research projects, especially as opportunities to increase income from teaching provision were less apparent, the team could not gauge how the faculty's research strategy, other than achieving improved quantity and quality, had been thought through and what inter-relationship it had with the strategic direction of the faculty's teaching provision.

Immediately before the team's second visit a summary of the new faculty Strategic Plan 2015-2020 was made available. It chiefly comprised an extended and thorough SWOT analysis, which was helpful to the team in understanding the contextual status quo and the faculty's understanding of choices for the future. During the second visit the team was provided with further detail from the new strategic plan comprising tables of performance indicators by which the faculty could monitor its strategic activities. Those activities and the overall content of the new strategic plan was mainly incremental, drawing on the previous strategic plan with some fine-tuning. The team learnt that the new strategic plan had already been approved by Senate and would be presented to the faculty-wide academic community immediately after the team's oral evaluation report, before its approval was considered by the Governing Board later that month.

The team also learned that the early stages of the formulation of the new strategic plan had been facilitated by an external, private sector "leadership coach" who, though costly, had opened up new insight to the faculty. The faculty would have welcomed continued external mediation or facilitation but such a resource, with knowledge of higher education, was both difficult and expensive to find in Slovenia. During the second visit, the team learned that the new strategic plan was essentially the product of the six senior staff members, led by the dean and co-ordinated by the newly appointed vice-dean for quality. Student input had been co-ordinated by an honorary vice-dean for students, elected during the previous month by the student community.

The team sensed therefore that the new strategic plan was to a considerable extent, developed in a top-down process and wondered whether the faculty's staff needed more formative opportunities to influence the faculty's strategic direction. Strengthening the bottom-up element of the process would not only help with keeping everyone duly informed but would also safeguard a sense of integration and secure broader ownership of the strategic plan. In this regard it would be particularly important to ensure that the faculty's temporary and part-time staff developed a strong sense of identification and engagement with the institution.

Additionally the team believed that in meetings with different staff during both visits it had heard a wealth of ideas and suggestions worthy of consideration as potentially able to shape the strategic plan. Formative consultation with staff would offset the mainly incremental nature of the new strategic plan and might allow the exploration of new scenarios, for example, the discussion on a "University of South East Europe" and the focus on the "Danube region" or the broadening of strategic partnerships seeking to align internship policy with research collaborators and internationalisation policies. Formative consultation might also facilitate a definitive decision on an old scenario, the establishment or not of the University of

Novo Mesto (or at least a sharpening of the concept and a clear scoping of the feasibility of beneficial cooperation) which, whatever the strengths of the proposal, arguably requires either concerted leadership and efforts towards implementation or, for removal of uncertainty and planning blight, abandonment.

The team also felt that whilst the new strategic plan offered a comprehensive SWOT analysis and at the other end of the process offered quantified monitoring mechanisms, it did not set out a clear action plan and, as a constituent of such a plan, specific and concrete action lines as to how the faculty would move towards its strategic goals. The new strategic plan would benefit from the articulation of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-limited) action plans with a more selective approach to choosing necessary actions so that a focused range of clear priorities was identified. Elements of these were already in place, certainly in terms of measurability of accomplishment. However, more was needed on the detail of operationalisation: who does what with whom, based on what input and with a view to which specific outcome, along which specific milestone concepts?

(d) The faculty has sought to increase its research income by obtaining further research projects, which also allow the hiring of additional contract staff, and by improving recruitment as well as, from the next academic session, by broadening its portfolio. At the team's request a more detailed clarification of the faculty's sources of income was provided. This confirmed that the preponderance of faculty income derived from the central government directed research and teaching grants and student tuition fees. The proportion of the faculty's non-grant income is under 8 % of which the majority is consultancy/contract research income. Nevertheless, as the dean has to undertake many tasks involved in leading the faculty, the team was pleased to be advised during the second visit that the faculty intended for some resources to be directed to the appointment of a faculty secretary, even if only on a fractional and transitional basis, in order to take forward the dean's proposed encouragement to more self-managing working arrangements and to review the provision of professional services. The team stressed that it would be important that such an appointee were sufficiently experienced and skilled in management to operate at a senior level.

Such a review would need to ensure that professional services staff concentrate on tasks directly arising from the faculty's strategic priorities and the maintenance of a functioning institution, perhaps identifying non-essential tasks, which could be discontinued. In particular, any review would need to address the Careers Centre which, from the self-evaluation report and the meeting with students, does not seem actively to provide an actual careers and employability guidance service or to be working collaboratively with the faculty's employers.

(e) Finally, the team received an update on the progress, or more accurately lack of progress, towards a new University of Novo Mesto. It was felt that a fundamental mismatch in terms of their public and private status between the potential partners and the faculty anticipated that the proposal would eventually be rejected. As the faculty was research active and eligible to draw on public funds it might be argued that the other partners, rather than the faculty, would be the beneficiaries of any merger.

There had been a joint marketing strategy and marketing activities as well as some other small-scale operations but no, even initial, development of shared programmes, even though there were potential synergies in the current institutional academic portfolios. The faculty did however advise the team that its new undergraduate programme from the start of the 2015-2016 academic year would mean that the faculty had the minimum of three discrete subject disciplines which was a pre-requisite in Slovenia for university status.

There was no formal sharing of academic staff other than where individual staff coincidentally had a contract with more than one institution. There was minimal scope for shared professional services as the private institutions were reported by the faculty to operate with very minimal professional services staffing.

The faculty's external partners were broadly supportive of the merger as beneficial to the region but some doubt was expressed as to whether Slovenia had the national capacity for another university. Political support for the project at national and regional levels was reported as variable according to which political parties and key individuals held power. By the time of the second visit there was some optimism that the proposal once again enjoyed some political favour.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Considers strengthening programme leadership and management.
- Considers the clearer differentiation of the role of vice-dean for quality from the other vice-deans.
- Keeps its strategic focus under review.
- Enhances more strongly staff opportunities for formative consultation on the new strategic plan, including input into the exploration of new scenarios to supplement its incremental content.
- Supplements the strategic plan by the articulation within it of SMART action plans which must focus on core, essential targets.
- Expedites an appointment of an experienced person with the requisite management skills to the vacant position of faculty secretary with a view to being supportive in strategic planning as well as to a review of the provision of professional services within the context of the faculty's strategic priorities.
- Ensures that the review of professional services pays particular attention to the development of careers and employability guidance.

3. Teaching and learning

The faculty is aware of the fact that offering attractive, relevant study programmes is key to institutional success. The faculty also views the quality of design and delivery of its programmes as essential to improving its profile and recruiting both more and better students. Therefore the faculty makes strong efforts to both develop new and promising programmes as well as to improve current ones.

The self-evaluation report describes the faculty's priorities in teaching and learning as two-fold: an expansion into more technical computing (hence the new undergraduate programme to begin in the academic year 2015-2016) and a better integration of social services, management and informatics. Whilst not necessarily mutually exclusive, the two priorities are somewhat contrasting: expansion into a new discipline area whilst consolidating the existing discipline area. The team was advised that the faculty's integration of social sciences and IT was a unique selling point, differentiating the faculty from other Slovenian providers, and yet the faculty's expansion of its academic portfolio was into a more technical IT subject area. In meetings with staff, the team was advised of efforts to continuously improve the curriculum, relocate so as to improve the learning environment, improve learning resources, develop staff competencies and increase the involvement of stakeholders in ensuring the relevance for employment of the faculty's provision.

The team heard that the main teaching focus of the strategic plan was on the growth in student numbers to a maximum of 300 by the development of two further undergraduate programmes in IT design and the user experience and in cyber security. However, in further discussion the team learned that little other than early discussion of the possibility of new programmes had taken place. Indeed, on more than one occasion the team had some difficulty in differentiating between the status of various strategic possibilities and proposals put forward as forming part of the faculty's strategic consideration. Perhaps this arose as another symptom of the lack of action planning in the overall strategic planning process.

The team found the faculty to be basically consistent with the Bologna Process, offering programmes in all three higher education cycles. However, the team found little evidence that the faculty had actively considered how the underpinning, broad curricular aspects defined in the Bologna Process (employability/social relevance, research mindedness/innovation, democratic citizenship and personal development) were best built into its programmes and therefore whether the faculty's mission and programme portfolio were consistent with those broader curricular aspects which stretch beyond a focus on employability and, in Master and doctoral programmes, build research competence. The faculty could then gauge whether those aspects were translated into competencies within its programmes, how its programmes delivered those competencies and whether programme assessment was adequately designed to measure student acquisition of those competencies.

The faculty uses the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and has a mechanism for recognising non-standard and foreign qualifications for admission and advanced standing. The students showed a full awareness of the faculty's approach to student learning, including

learning outcomes, the modular structure and clear assessment criteria. However, academic staff advised the team that there was little systemisation of determining module workload in terms of ECTS. The mechanism was mainly the individual staff member's professional judgement, mitigated by student feedback and moderated and calibrated by the vice-dean for education. Additionally, the final sign of any programme amendment remained with the Senate and its committees.

The faculty's approach to the Bologna Process is, in essence, compliant with national requirements so as to achieve accreditation by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Accreditation was indeed recently extended unconditionally for a further seven-year period. Minimal mention was made in the self-evaluation report or in the team's discussions with staff of a focus upon student-centred learning. Similarly, no awareness or direct application was shown of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area beyond an implicit understanding that they were embedded within local requirements, not least to satisfy national accreditation.

At present, programme approval, amendment and management are centralised with the faculty's three notional departments which the faculty terms "cathedrae". The three cathedrae are Business and Social Sciences, Computer and Information Science and Methodology. The three together constitute the so-called Pedagogical Unit. In effect, the cathedrae are merely informal groupings of academic staff around specific academic fields. Faculty staff advised that cathedra meetings were relatively poorly attended (even where programme review was for discussion), that staff could be affiliated to more than one cathedra and that they felt no strong affiliation to their respective cathedra, while there was a somewhat stronger sense of attachment to their respective research institute. Unless their existence is a requirement of Slovenian law or unless, through delegation, they acquire some meaningful function, the team felt that the need for the cathedrae was questionable.

The faculty operates centralised systems for the approval, amendment, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes with final sign-off by a Senate committee. The team was satisfied that the design of the quality system for these purposes, which was rooted in a standard national approach, was adequate. However the faculty offered no view on whether that standard national approach, to which adherence was indispensable in order to accomplish accreditation, had been thought through as definitely being sufficient to deliver the best quality in its programmes. In that context there is a broad band of different quality concepts to choose from and which should be considered in view of the faculty's mission and vision, branding and marketing, credibility and feasibility. In particular, the faculty may want to review its understanding of quality and its quality criteria, and the processes to match and assess these. While the team realises that the quality process of the faculty has already gone a long way in this respect (see the chapter below on quality culture), the team suggests that this could possibly best be done by sharpening the quality criteria and quality processes even more along the plan-do-check-act line of thinking, thus implementing a comprehensive quality concept of both fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose, even more fully.

In its meeting with senior academic staff the team was advised that, in relation to programme approval and amendment, despite their only recent national accreditation, the faculty proposed to recheck the relevance of core competencies in its study programmes. They also advised the team of an intention to infuse the curriculum with more entrepreneurialism and skill for self-employment. The team was also advised that, for the new programme starting in the academic session 2015-2016, two special consultative sessions had been held with local employers and questionnaires had been issued to recent graduates asking for their perceptions of the sufficiency and values of the competencies offered with their programmes.

The faculty advised the team that information in student evaluation questionnaires, including free text statements, informed annual programme monitoring, although the main focus was lecturer performance and student satisfaction. Individual lecturers would propose curriculum change and enhancement, discuss this at peer meetings and at the Academic Assembly, with ultimate responsibility for coordination and Senate approval being overseen by the vice-dean for education. The latter had overall responsibility for curriculum design and any periodic, more fundamental programme review, after a number of years from original approval.

The students confirmed their completion of evaluation questionnaires at the end of each semester. Completion was electronic and a requirement of progression so the response rate was high with even returns from students who had seldom actually attended. They also confirmed the emphasis on lecturer performance and student satisfaction but also the opportunity to comment on curriculum content and structure. Academic staff advised the team that the outcomes from the evaluation questionnaires were informative and taken seriously by staff, leading to behavioural change. A number of staff were surprised that some students felt subsequent action was not adequately fed back to students and attributed this more to a distortion of outcomes by a number of ill-informed responses from effectively non-attending students. The vice-dean for education was responsible for following through any issues of staff under-performance. The outcomes also informed staff annual appraisal meetings with the dean and consistent under-performance might result in the discontinuation of lecturers as state employees.

The faculty monitored student achievement through assessment. In the context of such a small institution, this meant that programme level and institutional level oversight were effectively concurrent. The team noted quite liberal arrangements for retaking assessments to achieve a higher grade or to retrieve a fail with six or more attempts allowed in the latter instance. There was no cap on the grade attainable through retake but the candidate did run the risk of replacing the grade already achieved by a lower grade in the retake. Unless the high number of assessment attempts is a requirement of Slovenian law, the faculty might wish to review whether such a high number is justifiable both academically and in relation to the efficient use of academic and professional services staff and resources. The faculty evidenced student achievement by “good levels” of graduate employability and appreciation of its graduates by key employers. However, detailed graduate surveys had only operated for one year and again graduate tracking could be improved through a strong alumni association.

The team found little evidence of the faculty's exploration of strategic partnerships and alliances with other public and private institutions in teaching and learning other than the limited cooperation already mentioned in relation to the embryonic new university. Whilst recognising the difficulty facing the faculty, in that there is an expectation that the primary vehicle for strategic partnerships and alliances should be the potential new university, there might nonetheless be merit in the faculty's exploring other options. The team heard of the faculty's difficulty in retaining better students, attracted by study in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, or other larger sites and, to a student's eye, livelier than Novo Mesto. The faculty might gain by looking into 1+2 or 2+1 undergraduate collaborations where initial study was at the faculty before progression elsewhere. Potential partners might have an interest in drawing upon the faculty's integration of social sciences and IT. For the faculty, such collaboration might offer the opportunity to combine its subject disciplines with others not delivered at the faculty itself. This might also benefit the faculty in terms of interaction between the respective academic staff.

The faculty demonstrated admirable flexibility in terms of planning its provision to offer varied modes of attendance for its different types of student clientele: employed or not employed, academic stream or professional stream and those with family encouragement to continue to further study or to seek employment upon completion of an undergraduate programme. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the streams seemed primarily to exist to broaden the faculty's offer rather than as an educationally principled differentiation of programme content, while some academic staff did maintain with credibility that there was an actual difference between the more theoretical and more practical streams as evidenced by some different modules in the academic programme, instead of the internships in the professional programme and by different content of assessment. Again the faculty advised that, even though both streams enabled admission to the Masters programme, Slovenian regulation constrained the consolidation of the professional and academic strands into some, perhaps more efficient, modularisation of a single programme.

The team was advised that both academic and professional stream graduates readily progressed to further study or employment. This indeed is in line with the Bologna Process since it considers "employability" as a learning objective for all higher education programmes, albeit with different interpretations. The faculty was confident that its core subject disciplines produced graduates who were in high demand, including regionally. The faculty cited Senate's detailed consideration of market research and viability studies as part of its approval of the new professional programme to start in the academic year 2015-2016 as evidence of its focus on the vocational nature of its provision. The faculty reported that the professional streams had work placement with potential employers integrated into the programme and completed a final project which enabled students to apply that additional external knowledge and develop entrepreneurial and self-employment skills. The team viewed this as a strong feature of the professional stream. The team, however, has already commented on the lack of provision for careers and employability guidance.

The students had clear vocational or further study goals and valued the faculty's emphasis on practical and practitioner-informed curricula and opportunities in view of work placements. Students reported that the faculty assisted and encouraged students in finding work placements but retained some onus on students themselves finally to secure the placements as preparation for future job-seeking. Again, the students reported that the faculty checked the standard of the work placement beforehand and visited the student whilst on placement.

The team was advised that the professional undergraduate streams recruited, amongst others, employed students, who might otherwise be interested in lifelong learning provision or commercial courses commissioned from the faculty by their employers. The faculty had done little to develop such provision, perhaps preferring the recruitment of potential students into existing undergraduate programmes for which central government grants could be made available.

The faculty supported its programmes with a virtual learning environment. Given the nature of the subject discipline and the student preference for flexible attendance modes, the faculty might wish to explore further the potential for greater use of blended learning, with some attendance significantly supplemented by on-line provision or even full on-line provision. Whilst again such developments are far from cost neutral, such provision allows recruitment from a far wider client base than currently is the case and might also be adaptable commercially to satisfy external stakeholder needs.

The team was advised of an intention to develop provision for teaching in the English language to increase the faculty's attractiveness to international students. Such a development would also undoubtedly increase attractiveness to local students and enhanced employability. The team believed that this plan should be developed into a full feasibility study, based purely on the meetings it had held with staff and students, the good standard of conversational English during those meetings and the existing use of some subject discipline text books in English, although in the absence of any detailed consideration by the faculty of realising this plan.

The faculty maintains detailed records of programme withdrawal and completion rates which form part of the annual report on achievement of the operational plan to the Governing Board and Senate. The team requested and received clarification of detailed progression, withdrawal and completion rates. In discussion with faculty staff it was revealed that the high withdrawal rates and high level of delayed completion were symptomatic of students taking advantage of central government admission and funding arrangements to acquire the potential beneficial student status but without the intention of sufficient motivation to work conscientiously towards a final award.

The faculty was perceived by students as supportive and approachable. The faculty had claimed to the team that one of its positive points was the generous staff-student ratios it offered to students, which allowed small class sizes and greater interaction between staff and students. Whilst positive in one sense, the faculty will want to ensure that this does not prevent the development of students as independent learners and does not require too high a resource demand in terms of academic staff. The faculty offered little in terms of formal

arrangements for personal tutoring but, given the very small scale of the institution and good lines of communication, the students were confident they could receive advice from academic staff or professional services staff on academic or pastoral difficulties. The students experienced no intrinsic variability in accessibility and support between employed and contracted academic staff and indeed particularly valued the input to programmes of contracted academic staff as bringing a useful practitioner viewpoint to the curriculum.

After a tour of the campus, the team accepted the faculty's accommodation and facilities as fit for purpose. The faculty rents a floor for teaching, office and meeting spaces from a domestic science college. The faculty also hires additional nearby teaching space on demand. There is no refectory but there is a coupon system allowing discounted purchases at local cafés. There are no faculty-owned student residences but students may rent rooms in two residences in Novo Mesto, one public and one private.

The faculty library is separate from the other buildings. The library itself offers minimal private working space and IT work stations. The faculty librarian reported that she had been involved in advising on learning resources before the approval of the new programme to run from the start of the 2015-2016 academic year and that she delivered training as standard to all students on the use of the library, information systems and databases.

However, the team was also advised that the faculty had intended to give up its current premises at the end of the current academic year and to rent a floor of premises occupied by a local IT company. This would triple in size the space available to the faculty and be located in a more appealing and vocational environment. However, the venue was not central to Novo Mesto, and initial approval had been rescinded and negotiations were now at an advanced stage for a more central relocation. The team would encourage the faculty to ensure that the new location, more accessible by public transport, allows the provision of more private working space and IT work stations than are currently available.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Addresses more comprehensively the greater complex educational objectives identified in the Bologna Process (London Communiqué) and the Council of Europe.
- Broadens its view on possible choices of quality concepts and consequent quality criteria, both at the stage of programme planning and at the stage of monitoring programmes in operation, to ensure full and consistent consideration of fitness of and for purpose.
- Explores the feasibility of strategic partnerships and alliances in teaching and learning with other institutions other than those scoped in the context of the potential University of Novo Mesto.
- Explores the feasibility of greater use of blended learning modes of delivery or even full on-line provision.
- Explores the feasibility of developing provision for delivery in the English language.
- Ensures that in its new premises more private working space and IT work stations are provided than are currently available in the library.

4. Research

The faculty does not communicate a specific research strategy in terms of identifying a specific topical focus but emphasises the importance of its research in financial terms as ensuring some stability in funding and allowing steady growth of the faculty. The self-evaluation report identifies computational statistics, network analysis, data, text and web mining, predictive model development, graphical data presentation, semantic technologies, language technologies, artificial intelligence and cognitive science, computer networks and simulations as key topic areas for its research. Those areas have been broadened by the acquisition of a super-computer. Research is organised within three, discipline-based research units: the Information Studies Institute, the Process Management Institute and the Data Technologies Laboratory.

The team heard that the main research emphasis was the refocusing of the faculty's research and project bidding away from national to European research funding. A number of current bids were imminent including one with prestigious European Union partners for the delivery of a high performance short course in the "Danube region", especially involving the other non-member states from the former Yugoslavia. The faculty had identified that region as one that offered a long-term strategic opportunity.

Staff confirmed that the faculty had a strategic approach to the incentivisation of research in that obtaining research project income meant that a member of staff was earning their own salary and could be "freed up" from teaching. Additional teaching could then earn the member of staff an honorarium. The standard annual teaching hours varied by staff grade from 180 to 300 hours. However, staff carrying out research in the context of a European Union funded research project might be able to work 25% less than a non research-active member of staff. The team also learned that the Senate had recently turned down a proposed direct financial bonus to reward successful research bids.

The majority of new academic staff were recruited to the faculty by way of and in support of successful externally-funded research projects. Rarely did the faculty recruit at the expense of its core budget. In the rare cases where this did happen, it was in accord with formal human resources procedures which, for appointments, effectively saw the dean as lead and main selector. Overall, the team believed that the faculty had successfully harnessed the efforts of a research-motivated academic staff to begin building an institutional profile just six years after its establishment. However the faculty will want to ensure, in the light of the significant level of temporary and part-time academic staff appointments, that all staff are duly motivated, engaged and involved in its quality culture and strategic development.

In discussion with academic staff, it was confirmed that the faculty's approach was very much bottom-up: scanning communications and intelligence from national and international funders via the faculty's well-regarded Project Office which also provides a comprehensive support process throughout the lifetime of individual projects; identifying appropriate research calls; collaborating internally (with oversight by the vice-dean for research) and then

seeking a preferably external partner (often a funding requirement); and if judicious, “jumping on the bandwagon” by joining an existing bid partner(s) and submitting bids.

Staff admitted that the choice of topics was largely determined by the constraints of the funders and that the faculty had no predetermined strategic approach and could not afford to be difficult in selecting research topics. In that sense, the research strategy is “opportunistic”, which is not meant to be understood as negative but rather as being reasonable in view of the circumstances. The faculty undertakes to build internal research capacity by seeking to involve all three of its research units in any major external bid. The faculty will want to remain aware that the research institutes are merely vehicles for the expansion and delivery of its research and that their configuration therefore would be part of any current (within the context of the new strategic plan) and future review.

As an emergent institution still building its profile, the faculty felt at some disadvantage when competing for, in particular, national funds. Nevertheless, the faculty believed its approach was working. It had had success in drawing longer-term platform grant income and not only shorter-term income related to specific research projects. The faculty had been able to build on previous successful research bids and restructure and represent them for further funding and was gradually developing a good network and mutually beneficial longer-term relationships with partners, although it was yet to achieve membership of a formal network or of a European Union funded consortium. It had hosted an international conference in each of the last six years, purposely to promote networking with a view to drawing on European Union funding and indeed the tailored invitations to specific funding calls.

Whilst understanding and indeed admiring the faculty’s flexible approach to research opportunities, the team felt that its research strategy should be thought through within the context of the new strategic plan, articulated and formally approved by the Governing Board and Senate which had on-going responsibilities to oversee the faculty’s research. The danger of allowing too much local level discretion to individual researchers and research bids was that this might distort the faculty’s overall strategic operation, potentially allowing its research to drift from the longer-term strategic objectives of the overall faculty. The research strategy should include some consideration of the relationship between the faculty’s teaching and its research, not only how its research informed and updated teaching and learning but also how the faculty resolved the possible tension between a professionally-oriented taught curriculum and its research focus. The research strategy, which should give due consideration to matters of research focus and critical mass in research, should therefore fit in with the faculty’s new strategic plan.

The faculty offered the team little detail about its efforts to generate privately-funded consultancy and research contract income in association with local employers and other external partners who themselves did not broach this area of activity with the team. The faculty’s push has certainly been towards more academically recognised research leading to peer recognition and publication. The low level of privately funded consultancy and contract research income confirms this. However, when articulating its research strategy, the faculty should ensure that interest in and potential for such activity is also explored and strategised

as necessary. An alternative income stream could be of benefit to the faculty if national and European Union research funds are reduced or if, in an increasingly competitive era, the faculty fails to maintain its bidding success.

The faculty had smaller financial overheads than larger, more established universities and was therefore able to maximise the benefit derived from external research income. Nevertheless, the staff felt that money was limited and complained that, especially national constraints, inhibited the ease of access to research support activities such as conference attendance.

The faculty is aware of the importance of a doctoral programme as a third cycle in the Bologna Process and as an essential component in gaining university status in the future. Research students were first admitted into the doctoral school only from the academic year 2012-2013 and student numbers were very low. The team discussed the detailed regulations on the operation of the doctoral school and the quality assurance of its awards with staff, including the head of the doctoral school, and was satisfied that these were adequate in design and fit for purpose in operation. The faculty complied with national requirements in terms of eligibility of academic staff to supervise or to co-supervise. Research training was offered via two accredited courses in the first semester of the first year and research studies were then completed by the end of the third year. The doctoral programme offers taught elements, as prescribed by national regulation and as seems appropriate. However, in view of the few doctoral students each year, the faculty is interested in finding ways to alleviate some of the burden in terms of staff and costs incurred by operating the taught elements on a yearly basis. The faculty may therefore wish to explore modes of co-operation, such as joint provision or e-learning, with a collaborative partner.

Students were able to do Erasmus exchanges and attend conferences, although several students were linked directly to externally-funded research projects and had less scope to be away from the faculty. Students were offered the opportunity to carry out teaching in their third year. Student feedback was obtained by the completion of an annual progress report.

The research students advised that they were aware of the faculty's requirements in terms of supervision, training and assessment. They confirmed that research training had been duly delivered as described by the faculty during the first semester of study. However, they noted that training was not provided in preparation for teaching in the third year.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Articulates and seeks formal approval of its research strategy.
- Keeps the configuration of its current research institutes under review, both within the context of its new strategic plan and as the future research environment develops.
- When developing its research strategy, explores the interest in and potential for a greater contribution from privately-funded consultancy and contract research.
- Explores modes of cooperation with similar partners to facilitate joint learning opportunities for the taught elements in doctoral programmes.

5. Service to society

The team met a range of external stakeholders who expressed goodwill towards the faculty and were generally appreciative of the faculty's provision and its benefit to them. However, they would have liked the faculty to extend its activities beyond teaching and learning into such areas as the creation of new enterprises through its alumni.

Arising from that meeting and the fact that the Board of Trustees was not operational, the team was concerned that the faculty did not seem to have made greater use of external stakeholders, and especially its employers, in addressing strategic choices. The external stakeholders had advised that, if a suitable and lean mechanism could be devised to draw from their input in such areas as strategic direction, development of new programmes and identification of graduate competencies, the development of employability and entrepreneurialism, they would welcome and invest time in that engagement. The faculty should take advantage of supportive employers within a relatively strong and well-coordinated local economy. The faculty should consider the advantage of an attempt to include its external stakeholders more consistently in counselling and advising.

The faculty, in its self-evaluation report and meetings with the team, showed no evidence of a strategic approach to service to society, for instance, through customer relationship management. There was no clear evidence of how the faculty targeted and systematised the contribution, whether in terms of finance or time, from its external stakeholders or indeed how the faculty prioritised, planned and monitored the level of its external engagement. The only key performance indicators in the annual report on the strategic and operational plans relating to service to society were a number of public presentations of research outputs and scientific awareness and numbers of charitable activities.

The team recognised the value of the wide range of interactions and cooperation between the faculty and its external stakeholders:

- influence on the formation and maintenance of up-to-date industry and practitioner-related curricula for new and existing programmes, often by direct contact between faculty staff and employers;
- the responsiveness of the faculty's curricula to industry-identified needs;
- mutually beneficial practice placement and work opportunities, especially on the undergraduate professional stream, which were often a prelude to permanent recruitment;
- the contribution of individual external stakeholders as guest practitioner lecturers;
- the practical, problem-solving and vocational ambitions of the faculty's graduates as employees;
- the retention of educated and talented people in the region and the creation of an employable pool of skilled staff for current and future enterprises, not least by ensuring the embedding of entrepreneurial competencies as a key part of its curricula;

- the overall contribution of the faculty's staff and students to the life and culture of the region and Novo Mesto itself in which external stakeholders operated and its consequent enhanced attractiveness to external investors.

However, the faculty came across to the team as a somewhat reactive partner in the relationships described. It did not demonstrate how it might take individual relationships further and how it might systematise and operationalise at institutional level its administration of and its approach across all relationships so as to increase the diversity of activities and simultaneously generate additional income in a permanent, sustainable way. The team believed that the faculty could fruitfully explore extending its provision for privately-funded consultancy, technology transfer and contract research, perhaps securing funded studentships or work placements through that source.

In meetings with faculty staff, the aspiration to secure additional income by provision of non-accredited commercial training for employers was voiced. However, this was well short of a systematised and operationalised plan to establish the market and employer need for professional training courses as part of a faculty portfolio of lifelong learning and continuous professional development. It would be important for the faculty to ensure that the academic staff selected to deliver such provision had practitioner as well as academic credibility. The team did, however, also note that the external employers it met preferred (presumably in part for their own financial reasons) the grant-supported recruitment of full-time employees to mainstream undergraduate programmes as a popular mode of attendance in Slovenia.

The faculty reported to the team that the attempted launch of an alumni association had been unsuccessful as there was no significant interest in participation. The team, whilst acknowledging that not all past graduates wish to engage as alumni, feels that the longer-term benefits to the faculty merited a second attempt. An alumni association would assist the faculty in a number of ways, including curriculum updating, provision of work placement opportunities, career tracking and fundraising. The team heard from the students they met of their engagement as ambassadors in certain activities on behalf of the faculty and believed that it should be possible to retain that goodwill as current students progressed to become future alumni. The team would like to draw the faculty's attention to the fact that winning a supportive alumni base is an ongoing process, commencing on the day of enrolment of the student.

The team heard that positive action had already been taken to raise the faculty's profile with local secondary schools and especially with their careers counsellors. The team also heard from meetings with staff about the provision of summer schools, with free access for current faculty students, to generate income and raise awareness of the faculty amongst potential students.

Finally, the team learned from meetings with staff and in the self-evaluation report about the faculty's direct engagement with the public through presentations of research outputs and scientific awareness and of a range of charitable and celebratory activities involving students.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Considers how best to increase societal and employer input into the strategic governance of the faculty.
- Systematises and operationalises its customer relationship management to drive forward its strategic agenda and income diversification.
- Attempts again to strengthen and improve its relationship with former graduates through an alumni association.

6. Quality culture

The faculty has adopted an internal quality procedure, “Rules of procedure for quality”, as the fundamental document for the quality management system at the faculty and provides a guide to how its quality management operates enabling “the continuous, expedient, all-round development of the Faculty”. The document ties together legislation, information regulations, work instructions and operational documents. It defines the self-evaluation procedures, the competencies, the working method and the measures for monitoring and improving the quality of operation. It is cited as being a requirement for accreditation by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The quality management system set out in the document follows a plan-do-check-act approach and is based on a new information paradigm of: focusing on added value for clients; achieving balanced result; leading with vision, inspiration and integrity; process management; succeeding together with employers; encouraging creativity and innovation; creating partnerships; and assuming the responsibility for a sustainable future

The document appeared customised from, perhaps a national, template designed for a larger more complex institution. The “Rules of procedure for quality” document was scarcely referred to in the team’s discussions with staff in relation to quality assurance. The document is well-structured and potentially useful, identifying a clear locus of responsibility and appropriate stages for key processes and staff. However, there is also a large amount of information relating to the management of the document itself. The team was advised of the aspiration to move to an electronic system. The team formed the view that there was potentially a useful and appropriate document subsumed within the existing one but that the sheer scale and complexity of the existing document had obscured its intended purpose of allowing the faculty to monitor its operation and standardise its processes. Adherence to the document had become a chore and various elements had fallen into disuse.

The document no longer really stimulated an active quality culture and behaviour and should be rationalised to be less exhaustive and labour-intensive and more appropriate and manageable for the size of the institution, concentrating upon the monitoring of key strategic goals and the completion of essential processes, clarifying differentiated quality concepts, and addressing more varied educational objectives as defined in the Bologna Process. It should have strict and comprehensive adherence to a valid plan-do-check-act mode of conceptualising and running the quality process could serve as core factors for an orientation which made quality-related activities inherently meaningful. Rationalisation should be grounded in reality rather than aspiration so that the document becomes an actively-used and easily maintained tool to assist the faculty. This would also promote a stronger internal stakeholder ownership of the faculty’s approach to quality.

The team found little evidence that the faculty had debated internally on which form of quality culture, beyond compliance with national requirements, might be most appropriate at this stage of its development and status: benchmarking, customer satisfaction, “fitness for purpose”, excellence or adding value. Mainly from discussion with faculty staff rather than

from overt consideration or description in formal documentation, the team took the faculty's quality culture to stem from elements of benchmarking against national competitors, from an aspiration to excellence and from a desire to achieve customer satisfaction (both employer and student) by enhancing the employability of its programmes, including embedding entrepreneurialism within them.

Academic quality assurance is mainly overseen by Senate's Committee for Study Affairs and the Affairs of Students. The Committee, amongst other duties, oversees the faculty's programmes, proposes changes in educational policy to Senate, oversees admission and progression and considers proposals put forward by the Student Council.

The students were aware of the Student Council and especially its role in making direct representation to the dean on matters of importance and in nominating or electing to student membership of Senate and its committees. The faculty advised that the Student Council and general student body be partners in the faculty's academic development and cited two recent consultations via the vice-dean for education with students on the theoretical or practical delivery of the curriculum and on the use of the Slovenian or English languages for programmes.

The students had mixed backgrounds and reasons for seeking admission. However, an appreciation of the faculty's integration of social sciences and IT was a commonly-cited factor. The faculty was aware of the challenge for teaching and learning quality which would arise from any reduction in entry standards but which actively sought students with higher entry standards, not only to comply with national requirements and as a matter of academic integrity, but also as a determinant of its reputation, profile and attractiveness to employers and students.

The faculty is supportive of academic staff's research and indeed expects all staff to carry out both teaching and research. Staff must achieve certain levels of research output including publication, which might be books, journal articles or conference proceedings. Staff reported that a successful individual research profile enhanced employability, potential for staff exchange and promotion prospects. Moreover, external research income could be used for their own staff development and towards facilitating publication of their research. Output is monitored as part of the annual appraisal of each member of the academic staff with the dean where performance and career development are discussed. The faculty advised that this appraisal function was now shared by the dean and the vice-dean for quality who interviewed all staff jointly. The team was keen that the faculty kept the dean's active involvement in the appraisal function under review so as to avoid any adverse impact on the dean's leadership and oversight of the faculty. The team was also advised that the faculty intended to broaden the inputs to the appraisal process through supplementing it by staff members also completing a self-evaluation.

The team was satisfied that a staff appraisal system was in place, the main mechanism being an annual one-to-one discussion with the dean. This gave an opportunity for individual performance to be monitored and for staff development needs and requests to be identified. However, it was reported that the general expectation was that academic staff would

generate the wherewithal for staff development via external research income. In addition, the faculty had offered occasional seminars on how to enhance teaching, based on lecturer self-evaluation, and had, for the last two years, offered some basic introductory teaching preparation at the start of each semester. However, although attendance was encouraged for all staff, it was only compulsory for those receiving low ratings in student evaluation questionnaires. In addition, academic staff could discuss teaching and learning matters with their respective “cathedra” and research matters with their respective head of research unit.

The faculty operates a student information system but this was designed chiefly to collate responses to national data requirements. In terms of the faculty’s electronic and hard copy information, the students viewed this as adequately informative and accurate, on balance tending more to undersell the faculty than mislead students by too many promises. The students recalled a helpful, explanatory initial induction programme.

The team was advised that, as a very small and closely located institution, the faculty enjoyed a good staff/ student relationship. The students were broadly satisfied with the accessibility of academic staff and with the usefulness and timeliness of assessment feedback. Senior academic staff advised the team of a new but strong appreciation of students also as customers. There was a consensus amongst both staff and students that student issues were taken seriously. However, some students felt that there was some deficit, apart for those students serving on Senate and its committees, in terms of feedback on completed actions so that students could overtly see that an issue had been addressed and whether action had been taken despite some students reporting receipt of information via the faculty student portal and even via Facebook. Closing the loop by the wider dissemination of evidence that the student voice was effective might encourage greater student engagement in the faculty’s quality assurance and student feedback mechanisms.

Overall student satisfaction levels were good and the students reported that opportunities to engage as student representatives or through quality assurance mechanisms, such as evaluation questionnaires, were taken up. Students were aware of where to find information and where to raise a query or complaint, and were confident to do so, and that specific queries would be answered. Students were satisfied with the availability of personal tutoring support, despite the faculty’s own misgivings about the level of that support in the self-evaluation report, and even reported improved results following personal tutor interventions. The “motherly” support provided by the Student Affairs Office was especially valued by students.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Rationalises its “Rules of procedure for quality”. Keeps the dean’s active involvement in the staff appraisal function under review so as to secure the key leadership, staff development and oversight elements of the role. “Closes the loop” on feedback on action taken in response to the student voice.

7. Internationalisation

The team heard in discussion with faculty staff that internationalisation was valued as demonstrated by:

- the faculty's pursuit with international partners of external research funding, especially from the European Union;
- the maximisation of opportunities via the resultant networks and consortia;
- attempts at cross-border and other international student recruitment;
- encouragement to students to take 2 or 3 month international work placements (with the consequent 10% limited more by available funding than student interest);
- a general open attitude to incoming and outgoing student exchanges but mitigated by perceptions that it was difficult to attract international students to Novo Mesto and local students had historically been reluctant travellers;
- an intended cross-border multi-institutional and one company Masters (Austria, Slovenia, Croatia);
- a relatively youthful staff with broad international experience, both via their own higher education studies or subsequent working experience;
- some non-Slovenian senior staff appointments including all the vice-deans The team also learned of steps to promote "internationalisation at home" through some English language delivery within the previously cited regulatory restraints; the delivery of its research awards in the English language; input from visiting international academic staff, especially at postgraduate level; and student visits to foreign universities or other excursions.

The faculty cited as an example of its ability to maximise the development of opportunities from linkages via resultant networks and consortia its continuing cooperation with a higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland which began with an initial chance contact in 2008. Such contacts were actively sought, especially by invitation to potential bid partners to the faculty's annual research conference which had achieved prestigious international academic staff and student attendance.

The faculty cited as an example of its interest in developing international activity the eventual aborted project to develop e-courses in the constant core of IT education with sub-titles in a range of languages of south-eastern Europe.

The team encouraged the faculty to consider more strategically, by consultation with external and internal stakeholders, what other multiplier effects might be derived from the sum and interaction of all current activity to the benefit of internationalisation. For example, whether the faculty could build on its regional, national and international work placements and the presence in the region of several large international employers to promote, as a unique selling point, the greater attractiveness of the faculty to international students through student internships and other work placement opportunities.

Recently, the faculty had identified the “Danube region”, and especially the other non-European Union member states comprising the nations that formed the former Yugoslavia, via its research and project bidding, as a long-term strategic opportunity. In the longer term an eventual University of Novo Mesto might become the nucleus of a University of South East Europe. The faculty sought continually to raise its profile to encourage international recognition both of its own standing and the relative strength of the local economic region which offered employment not only within large, generalist IT-using companies but also in small and medium enterprises with more evident IT-using needs.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Considers more strategically what other multiplier effects to the benefit of internationalisation might be derived from current activity.
- Considers in particular addressing its strategic potential to be a “bridge builder” between South Eastern Europe and the European Union.
- Further develops a position as the provider of extensive and attractive opportunities for student internships throughout Europe.

8. Conclusion

The team acknowledges that the faculty faces the significant challenges of an economic and demographic downturn, significant levels of migration and, at regional level, of unemployment and both national and international competition.

In a relatively short period of time the faculty has, however, grown and, despite budget constraints, has built up its regional and, to some extent, its national profile as well as a developing an international profile. The faculty is supported by an able, young and professional academic staff and has a generally sound reputation amongst regional employers and other stakeholders who would welcome the opportunity for a deeper, more strategic engagement with the faculty.

The faculty is at a point of transition having changed dean for the first time since its establishment and having adopted a new strategic plan. The faculty may wish to take this opportunity to consider the team's recommendations in its report as a means of thinking through the strategic and operational implications of that transition and the change process it will necessitate. The faculty would benefit from a well-designed and facilitated "rich" strategy development process so as to create a strong base for its future by ensuring the commitment of staff and students as well as external stakeholders and other partners.

Summary of the recommendations

For ease of reference, the full list of recommendations to the faculty is set out below:

The team recommends that the faculty:

- Considers strengthening programme leadership and management.
- Considers the clearer differentiation of the role of vice-dean for quality from the other vice-deans.
- Keeps its strategic focus under review.
- Enhances more strongly staff opportunities for formative consultation on the new strategic plan, including input into the exploration of new scenarios to supplement its incremental content.
- Supplements the strategic plan by the articulation within it of SMART action plans which must focus on core, essential targets.
- Expedites an appointment of an experienced person with the requisite management skills to the vacant position of faculty secretary with a view to being supportive in strategic planning as well as to a review of the provision of professional services within the context of the faculty's strategic priorities.
- Ensures that the review of professional services pays particular attention to the development of careers and employability guidance.
- Addresses more comprehensively the greater complex educational objectives identified in the Bologna Process (London Communiqué) and the Council of Europe.

- Broadens its view on possible choices of quality concepts and consequent quality criteria, both at the stage of programme planning and at the stage of monitoring programmes in operation, to ensure full and consistent consideration of fitness of and for purpose.
- Explores the feasibility of strategic partnerships and alliances in teaching and learning with other institutions other than those scoped in the context of the potential University of Novo Mesto.
- Explores the feasibility of greater use of blended learning modes of delivery or even full on-line provision.
- Explores the feasibility of developing provision for delivery in the English language.
- Ensures that in its new premises more private working space and IT work stations are provided than are currently available in the library.
- Articulates and seeks formal approval of its research strategy.
- Keeps the configuration of its current research institutes under review, both within the context of its new strategic plan and as the future research environment develops.
- When developing its research strategy, explores the interest in and potential for a greater contribution from privately-funded consultancy and contract research.
- Explores modes of cooperation with similar partners to facilitate joint learning opportunities for the taught elements in doctoral programmes.
- Considers how best to increase societal and employer input into the strategic governance of the faculty.
- Systematises and operationalises its customer relationship management to drive forward its strategic agenda and income diversification.
- Attempts again to strengthen and improve its relationship with former graduates through an alumni association.
- Rationalises its "Rules of procedure for quality".
- Keeps the dean's active involvement in the staff appraisal function under review so as to secure the key leadership, staff development and oversight elements of the role.
- "Closes the loop" on feedback on action taken in response to the student voice.
- Considers in particular addressing its strategic potential to be a "bridge builder" between South Eastern Europe and the European Union.
- Further develops a position as the provider of extensive and attractive opportunities for student internships throughout Europe.

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