

American University of Central Asia

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), situated in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The evaluation took place between September 2016 and June 2017.

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. 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
- A support to improvement

The focus of 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.

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?

1.2 AUCA’s profile

AUCA is a private university situated in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek. It has its roots in the business oriented Kyrgyz-American School, which was founded in 1993 within the Kyrgyz State National University. Four years later, it became an independent institution, named the American University in Kyrgyzstan. In 2002, it changed its name to the American University of Central Asia and in 2015, the university moved from the city centre, to a purpose-built campus in a quieter area on the edge of the city.

According to the self-evaluation report (SER), the university positions itself as an 'international, multi-disciplinary learning community in the American liberal arts tradition' with a mission to 'develop enlightened and impassioned leaders for the transformation of Central Asia' (SER p.1). This mission is supported by a number of general goals outlining its ambitions in areas of teaching, research and service to the local and international community.

Over 60% of the university's funding comes from grants from international and local donors and the rest of the budget is financed through tuition fees. Many of the grants are dedicated to providing scholarships to students from low-income families, while others are for specific infrastructure or development projects. As a private university, AUCA is licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science in the Kyrgyz Republic, but receives no funding from the Kyrgyz government and has full financial autonomy.

AUCA offers 15 undergraduate programmes and seven postgraduate programmes organised in seven 'divisions' (social sciences, liberal arts and sciences, international and comparative politics and areas studies, applied and natural sciences, international and business law, business administration and economic, and general education). The primary teaching language is English and since 2009, AUCA has had a partnership with Bard College in New York through which nine of its bachelor programmes are accredited. The university does not offer PhD programmes as there is no provision for this under national legislation (licensing is still only available for the Soviet doctoral degree).

At the start of the academic year 2016/17, there were 1,333 students enrolled at AUCA, of which 1,118 were undergraduates. The university employs 203 academic staff of whom 56% are full time and 44% are part time (usually professionals from sectors about which they are teaching).

The team was made aware that the university is unique in the Central Asian region in that it offers an education in the American liberal arts tradition, a relatively unfamiliar approach in the post-Soviet educational context in which the university operates.

1.3 The evaluation process

The university reported that the self-evaluation process was organised with the aim of involving as many people as possible. The core self-evaluation group consisted of academic and administrative staff and a representative of the student senate. The self-evaluation group organised six working groups to look at specific topics. Their reports were incorporated into the overall self-evaluation report.

The university reported that the self-evaluation process had been a beneficial exercise in understanding their own institution better and in promoting collaboration and exchange between colleagues.

The self-evaluation report of AUCA, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2017. The visits of the evaluation team to AUCA took place on 3-4 April 2017

and 29-31 May 2017 respectively. In between the visits AUCA provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

During the site visits, the evaluation team found a dynamic university that has developed successfully since its foundation. The meetings were informative and the team saw a high level of support and commitment to the university from all stakeholders.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Tatjana Volkova, former Rector, BA School of Business and Finance, Latvia, team chair
- Ivan Ostrovsky, former Vice-Rector, Comenius University, Slovakia
- Dionis Martsinkevichus, student, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania
- Anna Gover, Policy & Project Officer, European University Association, team coordinator

The team would like to thank AUCA president Andrew Wachtel for his hospitality; Director of the Center of Teaching, Learning and Technology, Anguelina Popova for her continuous support; and everyone who participated in the interviews for their openness and enthusiasm in the discussions.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The ultimate governing body of AUCA is the Board of Trustees, which is composed of prominent figures from the local and international academic and business communities. The board oversees the university's strategic development and meets three times a year, with additional meetings of sub-committees in between. Following the American academic model, executive responsibility for the running of the university is held by the President, who is elected by and report to the Board of Trustees. In practice there is a top-down management approach, however due to the small size of the university and his leadership approach, the President is very visible and accessible to staff and students alike.

Academic oversight is conducted by the Academic Council and the Faculty Senate. The Academic Council, which is composed of the heads of divisions and the President, functions as a discussion body for operational issues, allowing for coordination and communication across divisions. The team believed that the role of this body took on additional significance following the abolition of the position of vice-president for academic affairs in 2015, as part of a plan to decentralise the management of the divisions.

The Faculty Senate makes decisions on promotion, curriculum design, and academic policies. It is composed of academic staff, who are elected by the academic staff with a two year mandate. The team heard that formally their decisions need to be approved by the President, but in practice they are rarely overruled.

In 2016, an additional governance body was established, the Scientific Council ('Uchenij sovet'). This was established so to comply with the Kyrgyz law, which requires universities to have such a body. The Scientific Council discusses and formally approves decisions made by other bodies (primarily the Faculty Senate), but in practice appears to have limited power.

External stakeholders, for example representatives of business and community organisations, are involved in university governance through the Board of Trustees and through advisory bodies for specific divisions and departments.

The team found that there was some unclarity among staff regarding the roles of the various governing bodies. This appeared to be particularly connected to the introduction of the Scientific Council. The team observed that the number of governance bodies seems quite high for a small university, but understands that this is in part due to national legislation. Nonetheless, **the team recommends that AUCA conducts a review of the governance bodies in order to clearly define their responsibilities and avoid overlapping functions.** These responsibilities should then be communicated to the institutional community so that there is a common understanding of the division of responsibilities.

The Student Senate is the body for student representation, with members elected annually for terms of one year. Formally, the Student Senate is independent, but in practice it falls under the supervision of the Student Life Office, which concerns itself primarily with extra-curricular activities. The Student Senate has an annual budget, which it uses to fund student

clubs and activities. It also plays a role in resolving student complaints and improving the learning environment. Student involvement in the university's formal decision-making bodies is limited to a non-voting representative on the Faculty Senate.

While the team recognises that the current level of student involvement in institutional governance goes beyond the expectations in the local region, and is in line with American tradition, it falls somewhat short of what might be expected in European higher education institutions, where students are ideally viewed as equal partners in the institutional community. As a result, **the team recommends that AUCA empowers students by giving more autonomy to Student Senate and giving students a greater role in governance bodies and decision-making processes (including voting rights in Faculty Senate).** Fostering an increased culture of student involvement in university governance would also be in line with the university's stated aim of developing the next generation of independent, critically thinking leaders for the country. The shift in attitude towards students, and students' understanding of their own role is a change process that takes time, but the university is advised to draw upon examples of good practice from European universities in order to support this.

With regard to individual senior leadership positions, the President is supported by two vice-presidents, who also carry the titles of Chief Information Officer and Chief Operations Officer. As previously mentioned, the position of vice-president for academic affairs was discontinued as part of the decentralisation process. The division heads were generally satisfied with the decentralisation, noting that the increased independence in processes related to budgeting and human resources allowed for better reflection of the specific needs of each division. However, they also reported that some of them would have appreciated some specific training in financial and personnel management to better equip them for taking on the increased responsibilities.

Aside from the meetings of the Academic Council, relations between the central and division level appeared to the team to rely heavily on informal and ad-hoc communication. While this approach can work to some extent in a small organisation such as AUCA, the university should bear in mind the need to formalise some processes as it grows, particularly in light of the decentralisation. The university is already aware that coordination and flow of information is an issue (SER p.27) and it would do well to address this sooner rather than later.

Administrative services at AUCA are provided by numerous individual units that operate at a central level. The team considered the number of administrative staff to be very high considering the small size of the university. It was also noted by the team that there was a high level of turn-over of administrative staff. This contributed to a perceived inefficiency, which is compounded by the university's reliance on informal communication channels and a small senior management team at the central level. The team heard that AUCA is already taking steps to review its administrative services and it **recommends that the university continues to reflect on the number and functions of administrative units in order to consolidate structures and improve efficiency and effectiveness** and furthermore to **reflect**

on appropriate structures and division of responsibilities at the senior management level in order that there are clear lines of responsibility for specific functions and the current vice-presidents are not overburdened.

With regard to strategic planning, the team saw the strategic plan for 2011-2016 and heard that discussions have started about the next period of strategic development through a first consultation with the Board of Trustees. The team also understood that the current IEP evaluation and parallel evaluations by other organisations are also expected to feed into the next strategic plan.

Despite the lack of a current formal strategic plan, it is clear that the university has highly ambitious aims for growth and development. These include increasing the number of enrolled students, addressing the balance of programmes, which currently favours the fields of business and economics; opening of medical school in conjunction with the founding of a new teaching hospital; and establishing of a high school.

While these extensive and wide-ranging plans all serve certain purposes, the team heard from some senior staff that there was a lack of common understanding about the strategic direction of development of the university. This may be in part due to a reliance on informal rather than formal communication channels, insufficient communication within the university community, but could also be compounded by the decentralisation process, which meant that the aims of individual divisions were clear, but that these did not necessarily come together at the central level.

The current discussions about AUCA's strategic direction therefore represent a good opportunity to communicate with and receive in input from the whole institutional community, which will give a stronger basis for buy-in from stakeholders. It also presents an ideal moment to reflect on the current mission and vision of the institution. While the specific mission to develop future leaders for the country may have been appropriate at the time of the university's establishment, it now seems to the team to be rather narrow in scope, and might be broadened to reflect the current and prospective ambitious of the institution. In summary, the team **recommends that the AUCA president and board of Trustees continue a wide consultation process (with internal and external stakeholders) on the next stage of strategic development, starting with reflection on the vision and mission. Based on this, a strategic plan should be developed, which includes measures for long-term continuity, and contains appropriate strategic goals (based on SMART approach), related key performance indicators (KPIs) and clearly defined responsibilities and deadlines, as well as institutionalised communication channels.**

In addition to laying down plans for new ventures, the team advises the university to take into account the need for a consolidation phase. AUCA has achieved a lot in a short space of time, and this success needs to be solidified in order to create a stable basis for further development.

The issue of sustainability was also discussed extensively with regards to the university's financial situation. AUCA does carry out long-term financial forecasting, but it is also very aware that it relies heavily on grants and donations from foreign organisations to fund both core costs and new projects, and that the longevity of these income sources are uncertain. Students do pay tuition fees, however, many receive financial aid through scholarship programmes, for example those provided by the US Embassy for Afghan students to study at AUCA. These programmes play a significant role in widening access to AUCA, but it is not clear how long they will continue. In order to support the university's financial sustainability, plans are already being developed to increase the university's endowment, which will provide a continuous source of funds for the institution. The President also puts in considerable effort to exploring other income source. **The team recommends that AUCA continues its efforts to diversify income streams to ensure long-term financial stability for the university.**

3. Quality culture

External quality assurance of AUCA is carried out through the Kyrgyz government, which issues the university with its license to operate and approves new programmes individually. In addition, nine of AUCA's programmes are offered in cooperation with Bard College in the USA. These programmes are individually accredited by Bard College's accrediting body, the Middle States Commission of Higher Education. The team learnt during the site visits that at the same time of the IEP evaluation, AUCA was also seeking accreditation of its Business School through CEEMAN (International Association for Management Development in Dynamic Societies).

Internally, the team observed that there are many activities related to quality assurance taking place within the university, however there is no systematic approach for ensuring quality. In other words, individual processes are not coordinated or formalised and documented into a single coherent internal quality system. There is no dedicated unit or person with clear responsibilities for quality assurance, although the team understood during the second site visit that some measures to put this in place have started.

Similarly, quality culture is at an early stage of development and is not fully supported by the organisational culture, although the team did observe commitment among staff at all levels towards improving the quality of the education and research provision. A high value is placed on open and informal communication. While this has its benefits, it should be balanced with formal procedures and communication channels. The university should therefore work to **develop a coherent institution-wide quality assurance system (policy, methodology and tools), designate responsibility for this and ensure that staff have the appropriate competences or receive appropriate training.**

As part of this, and in order to ensure sufficient information for decision-making processes, it is important to collect qualitative and quantitative data from a range of sources. The team heard that AUCA is introducing the use of key performance indicators and has recently taken steps to improve the university's internal information system, with the introduction of an SAP data management system. Although staff reported some teething problems with the transfer to the new system, it has the potential to provide a good basis for improving the accuracy and availability of data. In particular it can allow for more longitudinal analysis to identify problem areas and monitor progress throughout the student life-cycle.

With regards to gathering information from stakeholders, students reported that they had sufficient opportunities to give feedback, and were generally satisfied that it was acted upon. They mentioned formal methods, for example surveys at the end of each semester, but also reported that staff were available and responsive to questions informally.

However, the team observed that the feedback system focused primarily on gathering feedback from students and that input from other members of the institutional community took place only informally. Academic and administrative staff reported few opportunities to give feedback about their satisfaction, or to receive feedback about their own performance.

Consultation with external stakeholders and alumni appeared to rely heavily on personal contacts. For example, business partners were often dependent on an existing relationship with someone inside the institution, and while an alumni organisation was in existence, contact details were not always been kept up-to-date although recent efforts are significantly improving this.

In summary, team recommends that the university ensures that it is collecting information from a variety of sources, including using SAP effectively for analysis of data, and collecting feedback from both internal and external stakeholders. In particular, the university should pay attention to ensuring formal opportunities for gathering feedback from staff and systematic performance evaluation of staff. In all instances, the quality assurance system should include measures to 'close the feedback loop', by communicating the outcomes and actions taken as a result of feedback.

4. Teaching and learning

AUCA's educational offer is designed on the basis of the American liberal arts tradition. This is an important distinguishing feature of AUCA in comparison to other universities in the country and region. This includes a high degree of curriculum flexibility in the first year of undergraduate studies, which is appreciated by students. The university puts considerable effort into communicating the approach and its benefits to prospective students and their parents, as it is not widely understood in the Kyrgyz and Central Asian society. As part of this, the university has formed links with a number of high schools to try and improve the quality of incoming students and facilitate access to AUCA (see further under 'Service to Society'). The educational approach with its focus on facilitating critical thinking and open debate is highly valued by staff, current students and alumni, as is the tolerant, multicultural environment. They also cite the university's reputation for no corruption as a significant factor in choosing to study at AUCA.

The educational approach also brings significant advantages for students after leaving the university. The team heard from alumni and employers that AUCA graduates enjoy a high reputation in the labour market and are sought after both within Kyrgyzstan and in the wider region.

The divisions can propose new study programmes for internal approval by the Faculty Senate, the President and the Scientific Council. They must then be submitted for approval by the Ministry for Education. However, the SER notes that the state regulations in this regard are not particularly stringent and therefore do not pose significant limits on AUCA's autonomy for curriculum design. If the programme is to be jointly accredited by Bard College, their approval is also needed. Academic staff reported that they were satisfied with curriculum planning processes and have sufficient flexibility in the curriculum to take research into account when planning classes and to propose changes to the curriculum, for example introducing new elective modules.

The university is aware of a current lack of balance between programmes focusing on business and economics and those in other fields, which comes as a natural remnant from the university's origin as a business school. The team also noticed that while some programmes are oversubscribed, others lack a critical mass in terms of student numbers. **The team recommends that the university explores options regarding the design and consolidation of study programmes to ensure sustainability, relevance and attractiveness.**

The team was informed of a broad offer of support services for students, and heard that these were well used and generally positively viewed, with information and support being readily available from the admission phase through to graduation. The Writing and Academic Resource Center (WARC) was particularly highly praised as a service that involves high achieving students as mentors for those that struggle with writing and mathematics skills. However, the team observed that there might be room for even further consolidation of

services under the umbrella of the Shared Service Center in order to provide a single starting point for student enquiries.

The modern campus and facilities were also well regarded, as were the ample offering of extra-curricular activities coordinated by the Student Senate and the Student Life Office. Some students reported an over-use of the campus for external events, which detracted from the academic activities, particularly due to the open-plan nature of the university building and therefore the university is advised to keep this under review so to ensure an appropriate balance.

The teaching staff with which the team met seemed highly motivated, enthusiastic and take a professional approach to their teaching responsibilities. The international composition of the academic staff was reported to bring added-value to the institutional community. AUCA puts considerable efforts into providing attractive conditions for visiting staff, however, care should be taken that this is not to the detriment of retaining local staff.

As has been mentioned previously in this report, concerns were raised over the uncoordinated flow of information between institutional units and across different levels of management. This was brought to the attention of the team particularly by the part-time and international staff, who by definition may have different needs and access in terms of information. In addition to the earlier recommendations about developing formal and systematic communication channels, the team recognises the value of informal communication to support this. As such, those staff who are involved in formal governance bodies, i.e. the division heads and members of the Faculty Senate, could play a role in supporting the flow of information between central level and academic staff at division level by helping to ensure that staff are aware of how information is communicated and offering further explanation where necessary. A better understanding by staff of the policies and strategic development of the university would further support the development of the sense of ownership and engagement among internal stakeholders.

Academic staff all raised with the team the high turnover of support staff and resulting inconsistencies in their respective administrative procedures. Despite the decentralisation of academic activities, support is still provided at central level and therefore central policies and processes are still required. It seems to the team that this would be an opportune moment to consult academic staff on their views and needs as a way of ensuring that policies and processes are fit-for-purpose and widely understood.

With regard to staff development, the team heard of some good practices, for example, the yearly workshop for staff involved in the delivery of the 'first year seminar' to discuss approaches to teaching, and the professional development seminars for teaching staff of the business administration programmes. Many of these examples were sporadic and varied from one division to the next, however resources for central support are in place through the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT). AUCA should therefore build on this basis to implement further university-wide initiatives to provide training for academic staff. In

the first instance **the team recommends that the university provides opportunities for sharing of good practice for pedagogy across divisions.** As opposed to some resource-intensive approaches to training, this would be relatively easy to organise and would provide a basis for multiplication of good practice, interdisciplinary cooperation and institutional community building.

Staff development opportunities would be particularly beneficial in the area of student-centred learning. While the team found a general awareness of the concept, there was a lack of a shared understanding across the university of what it entailed. Some specific examples of good practice were noted by the team in relation to use of learning outcomes and appropriate assessment methods, support for the development of generic competences for students, and pedagogical development for academic staff. However, these were generally confined to specific divisions and were not systematic. The team therefore **recommends that the university takes measures to support an institution-wide understanding and implementation of student-centred learning.** This should be informed by the outcomes of the analyses conducted by the CTLT regarding curriculum design and student learning. The implementation of student-centred learning takes on additional significance in the cultural tradition in which the university operates, whereby many students arrive at the university unaccustomed to thinking independently and taking responsibility for their own learning. As a result, staff have an added responsibility of facilitating and supporting students in this regard.

The team heard of some examples of varied pedagogical methods used in different programmes, for example service learning through the legal clinic staffed by law students, but these were sporadic. Internships are incorporated into programmes and students reported positive experiences from these; indeed, many students are later employed by the companies at which they completed work placements. AUCA also offers opportunities for mobility to a variety of countries worldwide, and students reported that information about this is readily available.

Also in the area of curriculum development, the team urges the university to **introduce measures to ensure a systematic use of learning outcomes and assessment methods that are directly linked.** This is likely to involve staff training in this topic, but would also need to be supported by the provision of some common templates for curriculum descriptions to facilitate consistency across the university.

5. Research

From its outset, AUCA has been primarily a teaching university, however the team learnt from the SER and through the site visits that it is putting an increasing emphasis on research. Research activities, both scientific and applied, are carried out by individual academics across the university's divisions, but also at a number of research centres. A central research office also exists to support funding applications for larger research projects. As previously mentioned, doctoral degrees are not currently offered due to the lack of legal provision for this in the national regulations. However, the team heard that the university does support staff members who wish to pursue doctoral studies at foreign institutions, while continuing their academic duties at AUCA.

The two most prominent research centres at AUCA are the Central Asian Studies Institute (CASI) and the Tian Shan Policy Center (TSPC). Both focus on issues relevant to the region. CASI promotes Central Asian studies as a research area both local and internationally and offers a Masters' programme in this field (the only one in the local region (SER p.19). TSPC facilitates research and analysis policy issues relevant to the region such as development policy, human rights and sustainable environment programmes (SER p.19).

The Research Office has recently produced a draft strategy for research development, which outlines a number of objectives, activities and performance indicators that could be introduced in order to facilitate research at the university.

The team supports the university's endeavours to increase its research capacity. If managed properly, this has the potential to support teaching and learning through research-informed teaching and opportunities for student involvement in research projects; increase the university's profile through research collaboration with external partners; and strengthen AUCA's contribution to the local region through research into socially-relevant topics. This would also form a solid basis for the university to offer doctoral degrees, should the legal situation in the country allow for this at some point in the future.

However, the team also identified some tension over the amount and type of research that should be done at the university. This included discrepancies between the research goals proposed by the Research Office and those supported by some of the senior leadership. As a result, there appears to be little alignment between the research development strategy and broader discussions about the university's strategic development. **The team therefore recommends that AUCA initiates an institution-wide discussion and research mapping exercise to explore the position and priorities of research at the university, building on existing strengths.** This would help to make clear the university's goals in this regard, specify the priorities in terms of resource provision, and develop a common understanding of the issue among the wider institutional community.

Much of the existing research activity is connected to regionally relevant issues and the team wishes to commend the university for this. It appears to be an area in which the university

can use its position as a leading institution in the region to maximise the impact of its research, make a significant contribution to regional development, and create synergies between the university's research goals and its activities under service to society.

With regards to ongoing research activities by academic staff, the team heard repeatedly of the need for more resources (time, funding and skills) to support research. The balance of time between teaching and research activities is a challenge shared by many universities across Europe. The team learnt that the university has recently taken first steps to address this by allowing staff to reduce their teaching workload by 6 credits per semester in exchange for participation in research activities. According to the SER this has resulted in an increase in research-active staff, though during the site visits many reported that this extra time was still not sufficient.

With regards to financial support, the team heard that the university does offer some internal grants for research activities. However, academic staff reported a very high level of bureaucracy, particularly with regards to obtaining approval and reimbursement of funds for attending research seminars abroad. The team therefore suggests looking for ways to ease the administrative burden related to financial matters, in so far as is possible within the legislative restrictions.

In line with the above recommendation about defining the priorities for research, the team **recommends that the university continues to offer internal grants for supporting strategic research initiatives that respond to the needs of society.** Externally, **the university should explore opportunities for building up relations with external stakeholders and partners in research,** including for the purpose of pursuing research funding opportunities. Another source of funding is contract research. This is already being done to some extent, primarily through TSPC, however the team feels there is potential for growth in this area and therefore **recommends that the university increases the visibility of what it can offer in terms of contract research, expertise and consultancy.**

Finally, the **team advises the university to offer training for staff to ensure up-to-date understanding and skills in use of latest research tools and methodologies.** As well as focusing on specific research competences for staff, this might also include guidance on how to integrate research outcomes and opportunities into teaching in order contribute to the relevance and quality of curriculum content, engage students in research activities and support alignment between the teaching and research missions of the university.

6. Service to society

The team heard numerous examples from both internal and external stakeholders of the important role that AUCA plays in the region. In line with its mission to create future leaders for the region, AUCA places significant emphasis on the quality of its students. Therefore particular importance is attached to the outreach activities carried out by the university, focusing on partnerships with local high schools. These were initiated as a way of spreading information about the concept of the liberal arts tradition and the educational opportunities available to them at AUCA, and due to concerns about the quality of the local students entering the university. Furthermore, during the time of the site visits, AUCA was hosting one local high school in the university premises, while their own buildings were being renovated.

Another initiative, also linked to preparing potential AUCA students is the New Generation Academy. This provides preparatory classes for promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds, mainly from rural areas of Kyrgyzstan and other countries in the region such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan, who would not normally be in a position to access higher education, particularly not at a private institution where the fees would prove prohibitive. Many of these students go on to receive financial aid to attend AUCA as a result of their performance in the entry exam.

In terms of links with local businesses and community organisations, the university has an extensive network of contacts through both formal and informal cooperation. Many of these links were established through AUCA alumni, demonstrating not only the prominent positions held by its graduates, but also the high regard in which they hold the university. External stakeholders reported that they are keen to be involved in AUCA's development and have numerous opportunities to do so, for example, through advisory boards for divisions or departments, by organising events on campus, by offering work placements and through business cooperation. AUCA's facilities and resources (for example, the campus space and the library) are made available for use by the local community and local organisations.

The team commends the university for its extensive contacts with external stakeholders and activities that are of benefit to the local community, and **the team recommends that AUCA continues to develop services and activities that respond to the current and potential future needs of society.** As previously mentioned, there are plans in progress that will further contribute to this. One example is the founding of its own high school, which will seek to provide a high quality secondary education for local students; another example is the foundation of a hospital, which while serving as a teaching base for the proposed medical school, will also provide health care to the local community.

These planned initiatives, as well as the existing events and partnerships, also provide an excellent basis on which to communicate about the work of AUCA to the outside world and as such **the team recommends that the university utilises these opportunities to increase the national and international visibility of AUCA's achievements.**

In this context it should be mentioned that some external partners reported difficulties in communication with the university. The high turnover of administrative staff made it difficult for them to know who to contact in case of questions or proposals. As a result therefore they often contact the President directly, even for minor issues. Furthermore, the outward flow of information from the university to its external partners was reported to be inconsistent. Therefore, **the team recommends that the university establishes clear and consistent points of communication for external partners and ensures prompt updates in case of changes.** This should improve the efficiency of communication and enable smoother cooperation.

A final recommendation in the area of service to society would be for AUCA to **develop further links with the national academic network.** Some instances of this are already evident (for example hosting conferences, participation of staff in professional networks), and the team also understands the contextual and even political difficulties in working with other universities that are founded on a very different academic tradition. However, the team advises the university not to neglect its efforts to engage with the rest of the higher education sector in Kyrgyzstan.

7. Internationalisation

The team recognises and appreciates the inherent international nature of the university, stemming from its foundation as a Kyrgyz-American business school. AUCA has a successful and well-established partnership with Bard College for the accreditation of some of its degree programmes and the team heard details of collaboration with other institutions from across the world for the purposes of staff and student mobility and research projects.

Beyond the fundamental partnership with Bard College, the university's aims regarding internationalisation centre on attracting international students and teaching staff, and providing mobility opportunities for students and staff (SER p.20). In the SER and during the site visits, the team heard evidence of some success in these areas. Over recent years, there have been increases in the number of international full degree students studying at AUCA. The university currently hosts 329 international students from 19 different countries, mostly from the neighbouring region. Local and international students reported that they appreciated the international atmosphere on campus. The open and tolerant culture that is encouraged at AUCA clearly played a key role in facilitating integration of students from different ethnic backgrounds. The team also noted that short-term outgoing mobility is encouraged by the university and students reported that they were very satisfied with the range and availability of mobility opportunities that were open to them, as well as the information and support provided in relation to this.

Similarly, AUCA attracts a good number of foreign academic staff, and provides mobility opportunities for local staff. Students commented that they appreciated the contact with international staff.

As noted earlier in this report, the university lacks a systematic and systemic approach to quality assurance. In line with this, the team did not find evidence of clear and consistent criteria for the selection of international partners or processes to ensure that they remained relevant and well-functioning. Even long-established partnerships should be kept under review so that the university can be confident that they continue to serve their purpose and meet AUCA's requirements based on clearly defined criteria. Therefore, when taking steps to develop their internal quality assurance system, **the university should ensure processes for monitoring internationalisation activities, including partnerships.**

The team sees that focus on international recruitment and mobility is proving successful and beneficial for AUCA. However, moving forward, the university could now broaden its understanding of internationalisation so that it is used also as a strategy to further the development of the university in all areas. Therefore, **the team recommends that AUCA uses its internationalisation activities as a wider tool for institutional development, including development of study programmes, staff development, mobility opportunities for students and staff, research collaboration, etc.** In doing so, it will be necessary to ensure that the development of the internationalisation policy and the management of international

activities is integrated with strategic development and decision-making so that they are closely aligned and to facilitate synergies between different areas of activities.

AUCA is also seeking to increase its international recognition, specifically through its inclusion in the QS EECA Ranking (for Emerging European and Central Asia region). AUCA is the only university in Kyrgyzstan to feature in these rankings, and is actively seeking ways to improve its position. The team recognises that this is one way of contributing to international visibility. However, the university would do well not to neglect other opportunities for this such as involvement in international academic networks and associations. As such, the **team recommends that the university continues with a range of efforts to increase its international visibility, including beyond the Central Asian region, for example by engagement in international academic networks.**

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the team sees that AUCA is a young and dynamic university, which can be commended for achieving notable success in a short period. As it enters its next phase of development, the team suggests that this would be a good moment to reflect on its governance and management structures and consolidate recent growth in order to ensure a solid basis for future development. Going forward the university will need to find a balance between its ambitious future aspirations and ensuring sufficient investment in its existing teaching and research activities. Furthermore, the team advises AUCA to pay particular attention to developing a quality culture at the university, which among other activities includes facilitating a greater role for students in governance and quality assurance processes.

The team is aware of the specific context of AUCA and of this evaluation: as a university founded on an American model, operating in the Central Asian context, and now undergoing a review against European standards and practices. On the one hand, this presents a challenge of finding an appropriate intersection of different approaches while respecting the different cultures and traditions, on the other hand, there is an opportunity to draw on a range of resources and the experiences and good practices of many models. With this in mind, the team hopes that this report and its recommendations will be useful to AUCA in the next phase of its development.

The team was impressed by the commitment and motivation of staff to contribute to the development of the university and with this in mind, the team believes that the university has the capacity to overcome its challenges and fulfil its mission.

Summary of the recommendations

Following its evaluation of AUCA, team recommends that consider the following key recommendations, which are elaborated in this report.

Governance and decision-making

- Conduct a review of the governance bodies in order to clearly define their responsibilities and avoid overlapping functions.
- Empower students by giving more autonomy to Student Senate and giving students a greater role in governance bodies and decision-making processes (including voting rights in Faculty Senate).
- Continue to reflect on the number and functions of administrative units in order to consolidate structures and improve efficiency and effectiveness and furthermore to reflect on appropriate structures and division of responsibilities at the senior management level.
- Continue a wide consultation process (with internal and external stakeholders) on the next stage of strategic development, starting with reflection on the vision and mission.

- Based on the consultation process, a strategic plan should be developed in alignment with the mission and vision. The strategic plan should include measures for long-term continuity, and contains appropriate strategic goals (based on SMART approach), related key performance indicators (KPIs) and clearly defined responsibilities and deadlines, as well as institutionalised communication channels.
- Continue its efforts to ensure long-term financial stability for the university.

Quality culture

- Develop a coherent institution-wide quality assurance system (policy, methodology and tools), designate responsibility for this and ensure that staff have the appropriate competences or receive appropriate training.
- Ensure that it is collecting information from a variety of sources, including using SAP effectively for analysis of data, and collecting feedback from both internal and external stakeholders.
- Pay attention to ensuring formal opportunities for gathering feedback from staff and systematic performance evaluation of staff.
- Include measures to 'close the feedback loop', by communicating the outcomes and actions taken as a result of feedback.

Teaching and learning

- Explore options regarding the design and consolidation of study programmes to ensure sustainability, relevance and attractiveness.
- Introduce measures to ensure a systematic use of learning outcomes and assessment methods that are directly linked.
- Provide opportunities for sharing of good practice for pedagogy across divisions.
- Take measures to support an institution-wide understanding and implementation of student-centred learning.

Research

- Initiate an institution-wide discussion and research mapping exercise to explore the position and priorities of research at the university, building on existing strengths.
- Continue to offer internal grants for supporting strategic research initiatives that respond to the needs of society.
- Explore opportunities for building up relations with external stakeholders and partners in research.

- Increase the visibility of what it can offer in terms of contract research, expertise and consultancy.
- Offer training for staff to ensure up-to-date understanding and skills in use of latest research tools and methodologies.

Service to society

- Establish clear and consistent points of communication for external partners and ensures prompt updates in case of changes.
- Continue to develop services and activities that respond to the current and potential future needs of society.
- Utilise opportunities to increase the national and international visibility of AUCA's achievements.
- Develop further links with the national academic network.

Internationalisation

- Ensure processes for monitoring internationalisation activities, including partnerships.
- Use its internationalisation activities as a wider tool for institutional development, including development of study programmes, staff development, mobility opportunities for students and staff, research collaboration, etc.
- Continue with a range of efforts to increase its international visibility, including beyond the Central Asian region, for example by engagement in international academic networks.