INSTITUTO POLITECNICO DE SETUBAL

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal (IPS). EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated IPS in 2008 with the report submitted to the institution in December 2008. In 2010 the institution subsequently requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation which took place in spring 2011.

1.1   Institutional Evaluation Programme and follow-up evaluation process

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.

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

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

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

1.2   The Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal and the national context

The Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal (IPS) was founded in 1979 and initially was made up of the two Schools in Setubal, the Setubal School of Technology (ESTSetubal) and the School of Education (ESE). It presently comprises three additional higher education schools: the School of Business Administration (ESCE), the Barreiro School of Technology (EST Barreiro) and the School of Health (ESS). The activities of the five schools are supported by the Central Services.

The IPS currently has 6.528 students, 562 academic staff. It offers first cycle and second cycle courses, as well as post-secondary and post-graduate courses. According to the Portuguese legislation, Polytechnics are not allowed to award PhD degrees.

The original evaluation of the IPS took place at a challenging time when legislation on higher education in Portugal was being reformed. The approval of the Ministry with regard to the institution's new statutes was still pending when the evaluation report was published and while the team also had the main contents of the new statutes at its disposal at the time of the second visit, the analysis made in the report dealt with the situation as it was at the time of the visits. Thus, by the time of this follow-up evaluation, quite a few changes had taken place in the institutional management structures.

As a publicly financed institution, the IPS receives the bulk of its funding from sums set aside in the State Budget and this is then complemented by its own revenue from student fees, research and service contracts. The recruitment, selection, and evaluation of both academic and technical and administrative non academic staff are framed by the respective career statutes and by other central regulations designed for all public administration workers. Furthermore, staff recruitment is limited by legislation governing numbers and levels, and constrained by budget.

1.3   The self-evaluation process and the evaluation team (later Team)

The self-evaluation report of the IPS along with the appendices was sent to the evaluation team a month prior to the site visit. The focus of the report was on the crucial changes and new initiatives the institution had undertaken since the original evaluation was completed.

The site visit of the evaluation team to IPS took place 24 – 27 May 2011. The evaluation team consisted of:

- Prof. Bent Schmidt-Nielsen, former President, The Royal Veterinary & Agricultural University, Denmark (Chair)
- Prof. Philippe Rousseau, former President, Université Lille 3 - Charles de Gaulle, France
- Mr. Karl Agius, student, University of Malta
- Ms. Tia Loukkola, Head of Unit, European University Association (team coordinator)

The Team wishes to thank the president Armando Pires and Vice-President Pedro Dominguinhos and their team for the warm welcome and excellent organisation of the site visit. And most importantly, all the staff members, students and external stakeholders of the institution the Team met, for their open and frank attitude towards the discussions on the future of the IPS.

2. Strategic Development

Both the original evaluation and the follow-up evaluation took place in the period of the same strategic plan (the IPS Strategic Development Plan) extending from 2007 to 2011. When examining this plan in retrospective, the Team found it very comprehensive and ambitious.

The Plan was written at the time before the major legislative reforms in the Portuguese higher education system and, while implementing the structural changes clearly has taken a lot of effort and resources from the institution and thus slowed down the implementation of some projects, the major priorities of the institution have remained unchanged. The same priorities and goals have been included in other key documents guiding the activities of the institutions such as Trust Agreement with the Ministry and the President's own action plan which naturally has enabled their implementation.

The Team found that great progress has been made in many identified strategic priorities such as enforcing the institutional identity and increasing the research input. However, the Team learnt through the interviews that there has not been an action plan to ensure the implementation of the strategic plan and thus systematic monitoring or division of responsibilities between institutional bodies in terms of implementation.

All in all, the Team was able to observe a strong commitment and willingness – from the leadership as well as the majority of the community – to carry out the changes planned and the approach adopted. And this is clearly done acknowledging and respecting the fact that changing organisational cultures takes time.

The Team heard testimonies and was provided information on the IPS's co-operation with the external stakeholders which led it to believe that the institution is much more open to the society than at the time of the original evaluation , when the Team found relatively "little dialogue or dynamic" in this regard. As examples of the opening towards the society, two initiatives can be mentioned: active participation of external stakeholders in the General Council, which is also encouraged and recognised by the institutional leadership, and the recent establishment of the Alumni Association.

In this context and taking account that the term of the current strategic plan is coming to an end, **the Team encourages IPS to prepare a new long-term plan that is realistic and based on analysis of the current state of play.**

Further to the new strategic plan, **the Team recommends IPS adopt a shorter term action plan defining clear responsibilities and milestones for achieving the objectives set.** This action plan could be revised annually or bi-annually taking into account progress made and the changes in the context the institution operates.

And finally, **the Team recommends that IPS define systematic processes for monitoring the progress made and for taking action if this progress is not considered sufficient.**

3. Management

In terms of corporate identity which was discussed in-depth during the original evaluation process, the Team could see the results of the consistent work done over the last years. Several interviewees – both members of IPS staff as well as external stakeholders – assured the Team that, whereas earlier, the institution was more of a federation of schools, nowadays there is distinct institution-wide identity which complements the school level commitment. This has, on occasion, made new co-operation with external partners easier. Taking the progress made in this regard **the Team encourages IPS to continue the work done to strengthen the identity of IPS**.

Part of the structural reforms in recent years has been the establishment of and election procedures for new decision-making and advisory bodies. The General Council, which elects the President, proposes initiatives necessary for the development of the institution, reviews the activities at institutional level etc. This Council can therefore be an asset in strengthening the identity of IPS through strategic steering. What is worth mentioning in this context is that the Team learnt of the important role of the external stakeholders in the General Council and how they have taken their own initiatives in supporting the development of the institution.

Further, at the institutional level, the Academic Council, an advisory body for the Presidency, consisting of the Presidents of the school level Pedagogical Councils and Scientific and Technical Councils, has in practice only recently started its work due to various elections at school level. However, the Team considers that it has great potential to work as a coordinating body in the academic affairs at institutional level and hopes that the institution will use it fully for this purpose.

Since the original evaluation IPS has been streamlining the administrative processes while respecting the academic competencies of the schools. New support units have been introduced at institutional level by transferring activities and resources from school level; for example human resources management has already been centralised and the transfer of certain administrative student services is under work.

The Team commends the institution for the consistency in implementing these changes and is convinced that – when well implemented – the institution as well as individual schools will benefit from these reforms in the long run. In this context the Team made note of the on-going recruitments of senior administrative staff for central services. In particular, in the current financial constraints and the growing competition among the higher education institutions, it is vital for an institution to

organise its administration in a professional and efficient manner thus ensuring that the academic units focus on the essentials. Therefore, **the Team recommends the institution carry on integrating and professionalising the administrative and technical services under the auspices of the Administrator** as planned.

As a last remark under this heading it should be noted that, despite the recent structural reform which resulted in the mergers of some departments, the Team still has the impression that there are quite a number of departments for an institution which is not really that large. While the Team learnt that the departments play an important role as mediators between the staff members and the school level management, it could not help noting that some of the existing departments are still rather small (while acknowledging that there are others that are quite large). Furthermore, the Team questioned whether the institution has, at any point, reconsidered the historical school structure. In this context, the **Team would like to suggest to IPS to take a further look into the school and departmental structure**.

The issue of low student participation in the current institutional bodies, which is also crucial to the management of the institution, will be addressed in further detail in the chapter dealing with teaching and learning.

4. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance and developing quality culture were one of the crucial themes in the original evaluation of IPS as the central quality assurance and evaluation unit, UNIQUA-IPS, was established during the evaluation process. Moreover, the institution indicated in its self-evaluation report that it is developing an institutional quality management system that could be certified by the national accreditation agency so to facilitate the accreditation of programmes. Taking these factors into account the Team paid particular attention to this area.

Since 2008, in line with a recommendation of the final evaluation report by IEP, the institution has made considerable efforts in collecting data on institutional profile and performance so as to support decision-making. Some tools – such as questionnaires, guidelines for reporting, institutional IT-system – to support this action line have been developed.

As in 2008, good practices for assuring and enhancing quality exist in various schools and the bottom-up approach is encouraged. And, as far as the Team could assess, UNIQUA-IPS is functioning according to its remit. But the remit is very limited.

Whereas the general objectives of UNIQUA-IPS are
- to create a centre of expertise in the area of quality management, which supports IPS community initiatives
- to define and improve the quality of services (Courses, R&D and Knowledge and Technology Transfer)

- to coordinate procedures for internal and external evaluations
- to participate in national and international initiatives in the area of quality management",

the principal activities have been focused on coordination of programme accreditation processes and conducting surveys and studies on various strategically important topics such as academic failure and the implementation of the Bologna Process. Thus, the institution is currently in possession of valuable information which has potential to support its further development. However, the Team was increasingly concerned by the lack of concrete follow-up activities after the survey. This is particularly important considering the potential detrimental impact it can have on the morale and motivation of staff and students to engage in quality assurance activities if they are seen purely as bureaucratic exercises with no positive impact on their work and study environment.

UNIQUA's functioning as a structure is mainly based on the willingness of academic staff members from various schools volunteering to promote these matters within the institution and develop their own knowledge in quality management. The unit has one technical staff member and a Pro-President in charge. Moreover, the unit does not have any role in the follow-up of the surveys, the Team was told that all that the unit does and can do within its current remit, is to forward the results of its studies to the Schools and the Presidency and hope that these will pick them up. And on top of this, the Team understood that at institutional level no one really has the authority to enforce the implementation of set guidelines or address specific problems at school level. Thus, the responsibilities for the quality of the programmes seem not to be clearly defined, or if they are, it remains at school level and has no clear connection to UNIQUA's activities.

Therefore, the Team finds that UNIQUA-IPS cannot really be characterised as a quality assurance unit in a sense that it can really play an active role in promoting and assuring institutional quality culture (which was one of the goals set for the unit at the time of the original evaluation). As it is right now, it seems to be more of an observatory.

Considering what has been explained above and the competencies of various institutional bodies the Team concludes that at least for now, IPS does not have a proper quality management system. Indeed, such a system would require a full PDCA-cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) with clearly defined responsibilities and competences to be in place.

In this context, **the Team recommends that IPS**
- **establish a quality management system with clearly defined responsibilities and processes at IPS level**
- **set up systematic follow-up procedures to the surveys and data collection**
- **ensure all schools are working along the same guidelines**

- **engage all members of community, including both staff and students, and**
- **disseminate existing good practices.**

When carrying out the activities, particular attention should be paid to motivating the units that do have difficulties.

With regard to UNIQUA-IPS, the team encourages it to
- **continue to provide the institute with the necessary data for decision-making**
- **be proactive in relation to the schools,** for example by contacting the programmes or departments and suggesting to work with them rather than waiting to be approached by them, and
- **create working relations with the Pedagogical Councils who are in charge of assessment and pedagogical matters related to the programmes.**

5. Teaching and Learning

In line with the institution's strategic priority of expanding the course offer targeted "to new sections of public", the institution has admitted a growing number of mature students (over 23 years old). This trend was already mentioned in the original evaluation report and since then the work has continued. In this context, the Team noted the establishment of the IPS Unit for the Development, Recognition and Validation of Competencies and the development of processes for recognising prior informal and non-formal learning. These processes were presented in the reports of "European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010 reports".[1]

When registering for the follow-up evaluation, IPS identified the issue of academic success as one of its particular areas of interest. The failure and drop-out rates had already been a concern for IPS at the time of the original evaluation and addressed by the Team in the final report. Since then the institution has committed itself to the objective of raising the current success rate of 53% to 60% in its Trust Agreement with the Ministry.

Through the discussions with both institutional leadership and the other members of the community, it became evident that there is a concern over academic failure. However, it should be noted right away that this phenomenon is not evenly distributed among the Schools and the Programmes, but there are those where the question is not that relevant and those where there are serious reasons for concern when considering the sustainability of programmes.

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[1] Reports are available at http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77477.pdf and http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77633.pdf.

It should be underlined as well that the academic failure is a concern not only to the students in question, but also to the institution. For a student this naturally means delays in studies and transferring to working life, possible financial difficulties and so on. But for an institution it also means inefficient use of resources, loss of income and in the end it may jeopardise the institution's reputation as desired study destination.

As mentioned above, there is an awareness of the problem and UNIQUA-IPS has undertaken studies that examine the failure phenomenon (in terms of the dimension of the problem in each of the schools/courses. The Team was also provided with a first draft of an "Institutional Plan for Improving the Academic Success of IPS", which is currently under preparation.

While it should be recognised that the reasons for the failure are multifarious and some of the reasons cannot be influenced by the institution (such as financial constraints that force the student to seek employment, student admission process that direct a student to a programme that was low in their list of priorities), there are still factors that an institution can and should address.

Thus, **the Team urges IPS to take firm action to address the problem of high drop-out and failure rates, including setting up continuous assessment of an individual student's progression with early diagnosis of major difficulties and evaluating the contents and organisation of the programmes as well as teaching methods and the assessment procedures.** To give an example, to cater the needs of the students working along their studies – which could also suit other students – the institutions could look into the options of organising evening classes, individual study options, e-learning.

Furthermore, based on the documentation and the discussions, the Team could not help wondering how much attention is paid to the teaching methods: what is actually "happening in the classrooms" and – following that thought – what kind of support there exists for teachers to develop their pedagogical skills. This could mean training courses specifically designed for the needs of delivering IPS programmes or mentoring of teachers in introducing new, innovative teaching methods. Therefore, the **Team encourages IPS to acquire – probably external – expertise in higher education pedagogical methods to support teaching and learning at IPS**.

During this follow-up evaluation there was insufficient time to focus on internationalisation, which constitutes one of the prerequisites for a successful higher education in the current higher education environment. But, as the statistics show, that there has not been great progress made in this regard within IPS and, having discussed the matter with the interviewees, the Team would like to point out that adequate language skills form a foundation for any international activity. And therefore**, it recommends that IPS seek ways to stimulate language competences**

of its staff and students so that they are better equipped to take advantage of the available opportunities for internationalisation. The Team does, however, acknowledge that all interviews during its site-visit were conducted without interpretation.

One issue that came up in several interviews was the question of student participation, in particular the general student body. While it was generally recognised that this may be, to some extent, typical to Portuguese higher education, many found it a matter of concern and felt that the institution would benefit from a more active input from students. IPS currently has five student associations (one for each school) who apparently have very active engaged students, but getting a larger number of students involved in decision-making, giving feedback and otherwise contributing to the development of the institution remains a challenge. The Team, for example, heard that student members of various Councils miss meetings quite regularly. Therefore, **the Team recommends that IPS make it explicitly known and visible to students that their contribution counts at all levels of IPS and to further engage students in discussions**. In this way, the students would at least know that their views are taken into account and appreciated, although it may not resolve the problem entirely.

6. Research and Development

As during the original evaluation, developing research culture within the IPS was brought up in discussions as one of the major challenges for the institution. In this regard, the Team compliments the polytechnic on the progress made in terms of the ambitious target of increasing the percentage of PhD holders in the academic staff to 50 %. The progress has been quite remarkable the institution moving from 17 % in 2006 to 29.6 % in 2010. The Team further noted that there has been an increase in the number of research publications in recent years, although it was not in a position to evaluate in further detail the type of the publications.

The Team is convinced that the efforts carried out in order to stimulate the research intensiveness has given IPS further competence to 1) satisfy its obligation to deliver high quality teaching in its own fields, 2) face the challenge of its own evolution in the constantly changing economic and social environment and 3) stimulate cooperation with industry.

In this context, the Team also would like to note that in the course of this evaluation it has indeed learnt of various forms of collaborations with companies in the region, which are based on scientific expertise.

However, the Team could not avoid noticing that the research activities of the staff rely heavily on their own personal contacts and networks, but not really on an institutional, consistently implemented, research policy with clearly defined

priorities, resources and structured IPS units. This was also acknowledged in the self-evaluation report of the institution which reads "it continues to be difficult to establish and explicit R&D policy". Nevertheless, the Team acknowledges the difficulties in this regard but would like to see the institution pursuing the goal of formulating a research policy.

Thus, the Team **recommends IEP pursue the effort to stimulate the research within IPS, namely by continuing the PhD programme that has proven to be a success but also by encouraging and rewarding other research activities**. These rewards can take various forms, such as career development, support to projects, not always necessarily financial. For the success of IPS in promoting a research culture in the long run it is crucial that the staff members who have a PhD feel motivated and find incentives to continue their research activities also after receiving their award. This is the only way to cultivate new generations of research-oriented staff members.

The Team further encourages IPS to strengthen the collaboration with external partners, whether they be research institutions, companies or other higher education institutions. These collaborations can potentially contribute to the diversification of research areas or funding as well as offer the researchers access to facilities and research infrastructure that otherwise would be out of their reach.

And finally, **the Team recommends IPS promote interdisciplinary projects** with external partners as well as between the colleagues from different schools within IPS.

7. Conclusion

As in the final report on the original evaluation – based on the material provided and the discussions during the interviews – and as surely demonstrated by the findings presented in the previous chapters, the Team concludes that IPS has demonstrated clear evidence on its capacity and willingness for change through the reforms that have taken place in recent years.

Over these years the institution has carried out several reforms that have contributed to its development and sustainability and it has been a pleasure to observe the consistency of this work. As the Team learnt during the visit, there are still many reforms in progress and in the planning stage. Thus the Team wishes the Instituto Politecnico de Setúbal all the best in its efforts and hopes that the remarks and recommendations of this report will contribute to the internal reflections of IPS when preparing for the years to come. And this is written recognising that many of the ideas brought forward in this report are not completely unfamiliar to the institution, but have been already brought up in one form or another by the people the Team interviewed or in the self-evaluation report of the institution. However,

the Team hopes that bringing them up in this manner will support the institution in implementing some of the changes, but also spark new thinking where it is needed.