PAN-EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

EVALUATION REPORT

July 2023

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the Pan-European University (PEU). The evaluation took place over the academic year 2022-2023.

1.1   Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

- a strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase;

- a European and international perspective;

- a peer-review approach; and

- support for improvement.

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

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

- relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management, as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

All aspects of the evaluation are guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?

- How is the institution trying to do it?

- How does the institution know it works?

- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 PEU's profile

The Pan-European University (the 'PEU' or the 'University') is a private university located in Bratislava. It comprises five faculties (Law, Economics and Business, Mass Media, Informatics, Faculty of Psychology), with a total of 2053 students and 152 scientific and teaching staff, complemented by 31 administrative staff in 2022.
The university dates back to 2003 when it was founded as the *Bratislava University of Law* with only one faculty, namely law. After its beginning as law school, the university expanded by adding stepwise four faculties between 2005 and 2011; in 2010 it was renamed *Pan-European University*.

PEU's mission is to *provide higher education at all three levels (bachelor's, master's/engineering and doctoral), creative scientific research and creative artistic activity, and the subsequent acquisition, application, and dissemination of new knowledge internationally.*

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation was conducted jointly with the preparation for accreditation by the national quality assurance body. The Vice-Rector for Education was the main responsible person; she was supported by a working group with representatives from various faculties and member groups. Key methodologies used were the compilation of data collected for annual reports, surveys to students, graduates, staff and stakeholders, and a SWOT analysis. All governance bodies at central university level discussed the draft version of the self-evaluation report (SER), which was finally signed off by the senate and Quality Council.

The IEP team undertook a preparatory meeting online (18-19 April 2023) and visited the university for a site visit between 6 and 9 June 2023. Following the online visit, the university provided the team with additional documentation and data, as requested.

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

- Luc Hittinger, former President, University of Paris Créteil, France (team chair);

- Gaga Gvenetadze, doctoral student at Tbilisi State University, Georgia;

- Anja Oskamp, former Rector, Open University of the Netherlands, The Netherlands;

- Maren Schmohl, Rector, University of Applied Arts, Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany;

- Achim Hopbach, higher education consultant, Austria (team coordinator).

The IEP team would like to thank all those who work and study at PEU and those from the PEU stakeholder community, who took the time to meet with the IEP team over the course of the online visit and the site visit. The useful and stimulating discussions which took place during these meetings are central to the IEP methodology. They ensure that the IEP team's feedback and report to the university have a sound evidence base, complementing that of the documentation supplied by the university.

In particular, the IEP team would like to thank Rector Juraj Stern for his welcome and hospitality, and Lilla Garayova for her efficient and friendly support at all stages.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

In its evaluation methodology, IEP examines a university's governance and institutional decision-making processes within the context of that university's mission and strategy to understand how these processes work and how they lead to quality enhancement. In its evaluation of PEU, the IEP team looked at the university's governance bodies and the links between them, the decision-making processes across the university's organisational structure, and the strategic planning process. During its online visit and the site visit, the IEP team met with the rector and vice-rectors, the deans, representatives of the board of trustees, the Quality Council, the Scientific Council, and representatives from governance bodies at faculty level.

2.1 Governance and decision-making

The governance structure of PEU, largely determined by legislation, is complex, with academic responsibilities divided among various bodies at central university level.

The board of trustees is the supreme governing and decision-making body that is responsible for all general issues concerning the university's development, among which is the approval of the budget. The rector is the chief academic officer who is responsible for implementation of all academic activities; he is supported by two vice-rectors. The deans play a similar role at faculty level.

A characteristic of the governance structure is the division of academic responsibilities between the Academic Senate, the Quality Council and the Scientific Council. Especially the Quality Council plays a central role regarding decision-making in all academic matters regarding teaching and learning, namely approval of study programmes and their revision, and approval of quality assurance results. The Scientific Council's responsibilities include a mixture of decision-making functions regarding, among other things, recruitment of professors and internal evaluation of research and consultative functions regarding the long-term plans. The responsibilities of the Academic Senate are focused on strategic planning.

It should be noted that the current governance structure came into force only in 2022 when the Quality Council was established through legal reforms at national level. The Quality Council took some responsibilities from the Scientific Council. A second characteristic is the involvement of external members in the governance through filling positions in the Scientific Council and the Quality Council exclusively with external members.

The governance structure at faculty level has some similarities to the central level. Faculty Scientific Councils are comprised of between one in four and one in three external members. A collegium which convenes deans, vice deans, heads of department and academic staff is the discussion forum at faculty level.

PEU explains that its management adheres to the principle of strategic level management which shall assure consistency of management at faculty level and effective communication between all governance bodies.

Although the IEP team found the governance structure and the decision-making regulations clear and transparent, following the legal regulations and as stipulated in the statute, it also found that the division of academic responsibilities at central level between senate, Quality Council and Scientific Council was not straightforward. Especially the key role of the Quality Council as main decision-making body in academic matters is a specifically Slovakian feature. Regarding the Scientific Council, the IEP team learned from various meetings that, although located at central university level, the council's approach is focused on disciplinary questions according to faculties rather than the university as a whole. The team believes that this body could play an important role in its advisory role to the management of the university in strategic matters at central level. The latter is

one aspect of a general conclusion that the team drew after meetings with representatives of all relevant governance bodies: there needs to be a clear leadership structure in strategic planning. Although the decision-making about the Long-term Plan follows the process stipulated in the statutes, including consultation with the Scientific Council and approval by the Academic Senate, the IEP team found that the meetings with representatives of all relevant governance bodies didn't make clear which body has a leading role in developing the university's strategic directions. During the site visit the IEP team learned that, in practice, a discussion forum which is not foreseen by the statutes plays a central role for the management of the university, namely the collegium where rector, vice-rectors and deans meet on a regular basis to discuss relevant topics and prepare decisions of relevance for the whole university.

A notable characteristic of the management is that at central university level the vice-rectors have no more than a coordinating role without comprehensive decision-making powers. This is partly a consequence of the important role of the faculties. As a principle, PEU gives a high level of autonomy and influence to the faculties, giving deans and vice-deans an important role in planning and implementing study programmes and research activities, as well as monitoring and quality assurance. This will be addressed more in detail in the following chapters.

The various meetings confirmed that the management, namely the rector and the board of trustees, has a close collaboration and direct dialogue with the various governance bodies, and the same applies to the faculty level and the collaboration between deans, vice deans and heads of department. The IEP team found that PEU's management style is very direct and dialogue-based which might be considered typical for institutions of this size. At the same time, the team wants to raise awareness of the potential risk of this approach, which might not work out as well when the university grows in the future.

The IEP team also met with many students during the online visit and the site visits, including student representatives in the governance structures. Students are represented in all governance bodies except the board of trustees, and the IEP team learned during the site visit that the student voice is heard and valued at PEU. It is to be noted that students appreciate the culture of open and direct communication with staff and management, which some said was more important to them than the formal representation.

The IEP team met with various administrative staff who showed high levels of experience and commitment to their respective fields. During the site visit the team learned that academic staff receives strong institutional and administrative support and that a good, collegial atmosphere is appreciated by the community. Regarding administration, the university supports professional development, although not in a structured way or based on formal policies. Especially because of PEU's ambition to become an internationally successful and recognised university, making internationalisation a necessity, the IEP team wants to emphasise the importance of foreign language skills, especially English language skills, of administrative staff. As the team learned during the site visit, there is a demand for upskilling in this area, which should be addressed by the university.

2.2 Strategic planning

To guide its mid-term and long-term development PEU uses a Long-term Plan. In the 2020-2026 version of the plan PEU states as its aim becoming by 2026:

- a university in Slovakia with internationally respected scientific research and development, artistic and creative activities;

- a university whose graduates are in demand on the labour market at home and abroad;

- a university which provides education based on active cooperation with major employers in the various sectors;

- a university that is recognised in international rankings of universities around the world.

During the site visit these aims were complemented by two priorities: to help stop a "brain drain" and to support the provision of excellent education in the Slovak Republic at the European level. Members of the university appreciated these priorities, which the IEP team found commendable. The plan addresses 7 areas and include altogether 8 primary objectives, 36 secondary objectives and over 70 tools. Although this level of detail would in principle give detailed guidance for the university's development, the IEP team considered the missing of milestones and concrete operational plans a decisive weakness. This weakness is twofold. Firstly, more concrete guidance would be necessary because of an often low level of operability of the objectives and sub-objectives. To give just one example, it would be necessary to give concrete guidance to the sub-objective *"to build the prestige and reputation of the Pan-European University not only in the Slovak Republic but also internationally."* One risk is that each faculty might, for example, choose different global regions for building partnerships, etc. Secondly, the responsibility for implementing the various objectives and its monitoring lies with the faculty level. This means that faculties could translate the objectives independently into their priorities as opposed to creating a plan at central university level. This weakness is especially relevant regarding the aim to become a university that is recognised in international rankings around the world. The IEP team is convinced that this would require a much stronger role of the central level in deciding in which fields the university wants to step up growth, and consequently, to which fields the university will direct strategic funds for increasing the body of research. The IEP team emphasises that this does not mean a completely top-down approach; on the contrary, the central level must decide on strategic priorities based on the faculties' strengths. The IEP team considers the insufficient role of the central university level in strategic developments an important aspect of a certain mismatch between the ambitious aims of the university and the current initiatives to reach the aims.

2.3 Recommendations

- Include milestones in the next Long-term Plan, assure a better alignment of an operational plan with the Long-term Plan and implement a formalised monitoring of its implementation at central university level.

- Assure stronger leadership of the central university level in strategic planning.

- Develop a strategy of growth that addresses especially implications of future growth in student numbers and research activities on existing structure and processes.

3. Quality culture

In its evaluation methodology, IEP examines a university's quality assurance and quality enhancement arrangements. With the university's mission and strategy as starting point, the focus of the evaluation is how these arrangements contribute to the achievement of the university's aims and the creation of a culture of quality. In its evaluation of PEU, the IEP team looked at the concepts, processes and tools in use. An important reference point are the developments in the broad field of quality culture that have taken place across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) during the last decade. In particular, the development and refinement of European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, which are now used widely by universities and national agencies across the EHEA, guided the evaluation.

Quality assurance and enhancement arrangements were addressed during the site visit in meetings with management, staff and students. The IEP team wants to commend PEU for the high level of commitment of management, staff and students to achieving a high quality of all operations — a feature that the IEP team observed during the entire review process. As part of its ambition to become an internationally respected and successful university, PEU gives quality assurance a high priority. The IEP review is one example that demonstrates this commitment to improving quality and living up to international standards.

3.1 Quality concepts and instruments

PEU has implemented an internal quality assurance system with the purpose "to support the development of the PEU in accordance with the European concept of quality of higher education and the scientific and research, development and innovation, artistic or other creative activities." The system, approved by the rector in February 2022, is based on an understanding of quality assurance as a standards-based evaluation of achievements of PEU's mission and goals, and improvement of its activities. Although the definition of quality is taken from ISO 9000:2015, PEU does not explicitly apply ISO.

As in governance, internal quality assurance at PEU also underwent significant developments in recent years. These were partly induced by legal reforms in 2022, namely changes in the national accreditation system, which put a stronger focus on internal quality assurance at institutional level and required universities to implement an internal quality assurance system. It is this legal reform that also brought about the establishment of the Quality Council. It is to be noted that the system in place at the time of the site visit had partly been developed only months ago and had not been fully implemented.

The main instruments used were, firstly, a detailed policy for designing, approving and revising study programmes, as well as an annual review. Secondly, questionnaires were introduced to collect feedback from students and staff, and thirdly, regulations concerning evaluation of research and scientific activities were implemented, in some cases including external experts.

The policy for designing study programmes contains all features that the ESG require and assures involvement of different groups of stakeholders. Regarding the questionnaires, it is worth noting that PEU considers them a key instrument to collect feedback and involve students, staff and stakeholders in quality assurance. The questionnaires for students and staff contain open questions and provide opportunities to give written feedback in addition to standardised assessments.

Regarding research, the IEP team notes that "the Programme to Support Science and Research" at the PEU, approved in late 2022, is — despite its name — mainly a policy to evaluate research activities at faculty level, including indicator-based self-evaluation and bibliometric analysis. If the

bibliometric analysis does not provide sufficient information, regular feedback from partners in HE and industry is included. The policy is yet to be implemented.

Information about and results from all these activities are compiled in the annual quality report that is to be presented to the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport and published on PEU's website. This report is a comprehensive indicator-based collection of key performance data and information about PEU's activities; in addition, key statistical data such as employment rates of graduates provided by public authorities are included. The IEP team found that the comprehensive list of indicators used for compiling this report provides the university with a thorough picture of its operations and achievements. This is also relevant because it creates transparency for academic and scientific staff regarding the indicator-based component of their salaries.

The internal quality assurance system itself is to be evaluated on a five-year basis.

While the design of the policy for developing and approving study programmes and the questionnaires follows widespread patterns, the IEP team considers the collection of great amounts of data and the comprehensive reporting schemes a specific characteristic of the internal quality assurance system.

3.2 Quality structures and implementation

The main responsibility for internal quality assurance lies with the Quality Council that has a key role in approving and reviewing programmes and approves all reports generated in the system. The Quality Council became operational in Summer 2022. The implementation of the quality assurance activities is within the responsibility of the Vice Rector for Education, who also collaborates with the Vice Deans for Education in this matter. A dedicated administrative unit that would implement quality assurance activities does not exist. The faculty level also plays an important role in implementing policies because practicalities like conducting course evaluations are within the responsibility of the deans and vice deans.

During the site visit the IEP team learned that there is a system with clear purposes, structures and policies in place, implemented only very recently. However, the team found that there were two approaches, each with a different focus, which were important in the daily life of the university. Firstly, informal communication was often referred to as an important quality assurance tool. Secondly, quality assurance was often equated with addressing and solving students' problems when they arose. The IEP team considered these as two examples among many of an "individual approach" which all parties involved — students, teachers, administrators and management — appreciated and were proud of. Especially students were happy with opportunities to solve many problems by directly addressing teachers or management. On the one hand, the team commends PEU for the openness toward direct communication and willingness to address issues right away; this is one example of the focus on students. On the other, the team also sees unintended downsides of this situation. Firstly, quality assurance is too much focused on solving problems when they arise; secondly such an approach has a very individual component. These individual and reactive approaches dominate, whereas *institutional learning* from solving individual problems is underdeveloped, limiting the quality enhancement orientation of quality assurance. Thirdly, the preference for informally raising individual problems is seen as an alternative to formal tools such as questionnaires, which is especially relevant regarding student questionnaires. Despite the high level of general appreciation by the students for these tools, the response rates to questionnaires are to be considered just fair. The IEP team heard from students that they were not convinced of the confidentiality of their answers and furthermore, were sceptical of follow-up activities. The IEP team considers it necessary to take these comments seriously. The great appreciation of the students for the institution's individual approach is a good basis for a close collaboration with them in the formal

aspects of internal quality assurance. The university might address the widespread reservation against comprehensive questionnaires by considering other tools to collect feedback from students such as student panels or focus groups. PEU should also take measures to inform stakeholders better and more directly about follow-up activities. Both would strengthen the credibility of feedback mechanisms.

Regarding collection of data and reporting, a key feature of quality assurance at PEU, the IEP team found that the reports focus too much on the presentation of data, whereas the analysis of the great amount of information is somewhat underdeveloped. Especially the 2022 edition of the annual *Internal evaluation report on the implementation of the internal quality assurance system at the Pan-European University* is more a data compilation than an analytical report. Such a report would include conclusions based on the achievement of the goals according to the indicators and recommendations for further action. The team considers this a weakness of the quality assurance system and an opportunity for improvement.

In addition to these two findings (lack of institutional learning and lack of data analysis), the IEP team also found that the link between internal quality assurance and strategic planning is underdeveloped. PEU emphasizes that to "meet the strategic objectives set out in the long-term plan, it is important that the internal quality system provides the Pan-European University with important findings and insights for improvement." But although PEU's internal quality assurance uses comprehensive sets of indicators, these are not linked to the objectives and sub-objectives of the Long-term Plan. The IEP team was informed that this results from the fact that the internal quality assurance system was introduced only two years after the Long-term Plan; however, this does not fully explain why no connection between the two sets of indicators was made.

 Consequently, it was not clear to the team how results from internal quality assurance inform management and strategic decisions. Combined with the underdeveloped monitoring of the implementation of the Long-term Plan at central university level, this calls for an integrated review of the Long-term Plan, its operationalisation and monitoring and, finally, the indicators of the internal quality assurance and the analysis in preparation of the next Long-term Plan.

The IEP team wishes to draw PEU's attention to the relevance of reports also for accountability purposes. Since the annual report and other material is to be published, PEU could more effectively target the potential and intended readers and *translate* the analysis of data and processes into appropriate language for the intended audience.

3.3 Recommendations

- Harmonise indicators used for quality assurance and for measuring achievements in the Long-term Plan.

- Consider additional or alternative feedback tools for students such as focus groups, student panels, etc., and build trust in confidentiality and effectiveness of feedback tools.

- Strengthen information about follow-up activities and use social media channels.

- Keep the audience in mind when writing reports.

4. Teaching and learning

4.1 Teaching policies

In its Long-term Plan, PEU states the aim to become by 2026 a university whose graduates are in demand on the labour market at home and abroad, and a university which provides education based on active cooperation with major employers in the various sectors. Furthermore, PEU aims at "interdisciplinarity across fields of study, generating the grounds for increasing the likelihood of graduates employment", which is why the university claims to differ from other universities regarding the arrangement of its faculties.

PEU offers seven undergraduate programmes, six graduate programmes, one engineering programme and seven doctoral programmes, the latter at all but the faculty of informatics. The portfolio attracts students not only because of specific programmes such as diplomacy at the law faculty but also because PEU offers programmes that students cannot find at other private universities, particularly in the faculty of informatics. In addition, PEU considers offering programmes for part-time students as a competitive advantage. At the same time, the IEP team wants to highlight that only the Bachelor's and Master's programmes in *International Relations and Diplomacy* at the faculty of law and a small number of courses are taught in English. Given that PEU considers the low number of incoming students a weakness and that it aims to become a university respected on an international level, this is clearly a mismatch.

Two of the most obvious characteristics of PEU's approach to learning and teaching are the integration of theoretical and practical learning in the relevant professional fields and what PEU calls the *individual approach*. Although no formal definition exists, the IEP team concluded from various explanations that PEU, based on its comparably low student numbers, puts a lot of effort in upholding direct communication with individual students through an open-door policy, addressing relevant topics directly and often informally. This approach applies to the organisation of learning, choice of courses, learning support, personal and academic problems, quality assurance, etc. During its online visit and the site visit to PEU, the team met with groups of teachers of three selected faculties and with students from across all five faculties. The team learned from these meetings that there are many committed teachers who are focused on the students and embrace the individual approach.

These characteristics are apparent at a conceptional as well as an operational level. Close collaboration with partners from employers is a feature of the well-established processes of designing and reviewing study programmes. Furthermore, the integration of practical learning through internships and courses taught by practitioners was unanimously praised by all parties involved, namely students, teachers and employers. As the IEP team learned, this specific feature results in a good preparation of students for their professional careers and gives them a competitive advantage to graduates from most other universities in the country. PEU regularly collaborates with a wide array of partners from industry, public and private service, NGOs, professional bodies and public authorities, regarding internships for students as well as teaching by experts from the field. These collaborations are extensive and include extra-curricular activities such as participation in events, guest lectures, etc.

The team found that the individual approach is a strength of PEU, resulting in the close communication between students and teachers and the opportunity to answer questions directly if possible. This approach is also evident in the support for part-time students to organise their studies

and in the offer of personalised study plans for students in specific circumstances such as family obligations, illness, etc. In general, students have some flexibility — within limits — to choose elective modules during their learning journey.

The team was impressed by the high level of appreciation by students for the individual approach which is, as many students confirmed, clearly a competitive advantage of PEU, as is the integration of practical learning in the relevant professional fields. The IEP team commends PEU for these approaches. Nonetheless, the team wishes to draw the university's attention to the fact that not all practices of the individual approach might be sustainable in case of a substantial growth in student numbers. At the time of the site-visit, the faculty of psychology had experienced some challenges in catering for the increased student population with the established practices.

Although innovative didactics are used in some faculties, the team learned that this does not follow institutional policies; rather, it is triggered by individual approaches of the faculties. The same applies to interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, which were visible to the IEP team only at a very low level despite being one of the strategic priorities.

Virtual learning environments were implemented successfully during the pandemic but lost relevance afterwards. In general, the IEP team found that, for the most part, didactics are not very innovative, and student centeredness in learning and teaching should be grounded in an explicit concept communicated to all teachers and students. Although the IEP team found very engaged teachers, it was clear that choice of didactics is left very much to the autonomy of teachers. This calls for a stronger institutional guidance that would also remedy some outdated teaching methods that were reported. This applies in a similar way to the concept of flexible learning paths. It's true that PEU is to be commended for its responsiveness to wishes from students for additional courses, but this does not in itself constitute a concept for various learning paths based on different educational backgrounds. Furthermore, the team found that interdisciplinarity between faculties is underdeveloped, even though PEU claims a unique structure of its faculties and interdisciplinarity as one of its aims.

Regarding monitoring of teaching and learning, the team found again a mixture of informal communication and comprehensive data collections. In addition, faculties have planning meetings under the leadership of deans and vice deans where the choice of courses for the following semester is discussed, as also experience with assessment methods during the ending semester. While this was unanimously reported as effective, formalised regular reviews of study programmes with student and stakeholder involvement only rarely occur, although regulations and procedures for design and revision of study programmes are clear and transparent and call for such review. Such reviews only take place as deemed necessary when changes are envisaged.

The team also found some advanced facilities with labs and studios, up to date equipped classrooms, and an operational IT-system with applications for online-teaching and learning.

The implementation of study programmes and the organisation of teaching and learning are good examples for the high level of autonomy of the faculties, with a low level of institutional policies. However, the team learned about good and close collaboration between the Vice-Rector and Vice Deans for Education.

In conclusion, the study programme portfolio and the individual approach as well as the integration of theoretical and practical learning are strengths of PEU. An exception to these general strengths is

the lack of or limited teaching in English. Students confirmed that they feel well-prepared for their future careers. This is corroborated by high employment rates and recent surveys that show that graduates from some of PEU faculties are among the country's highest salary earners.

4.2 Student support

PEU offers various student support activities. The IEP team was impressed by the variety of activities students are offered to support a successful entrance to the labour market. Linked to and based on the close collaboration with relevant partners and in addition to the offer of internships during the studies, the faculties offer career days.

A range of services are in place at PEU to support students with their learning and progression during their learning journey. An important student support activity has its roots in the faculty of psychology, which started a mentoring system and psychological counselling, the latter expanding to the whole university when an academic counselling centre for all students was established. Mentors from among graduate students provide support and assistance to the undergraduate mentees by acting as guides and first point of contact for questions, uncertainties and problems.

The IEP team found commendable initiatives in all faculties, such as the discussion format *HydePark* organised by the law faculty for its students, supporting students' relationships both with their faculty and the university as a whole, while creating a space for them to discuss and express their opinions.

The faculties offer various activities to support the learning journey such as the *Best Master's and Bachelor's Thesis Competition* at the faculty of business, and the Faculty Round of Student Scientific and Professional Activities of the faculty of psychology in which undergraduate and graduate students present scientific papers.
These are a few examples of commendable initiatives coming from a faculty, but they do not necessarily proliferate to other faculties or into policies at central university level. Such support activities are complemented by financial support in form of scholarships funded from the state budget.
Finally, PEU organises leisure activities for students of all faculties such as ski trips, opening semester parties, sports courses, etc.
On the one hand, the faculties are to be commended for these activities; on the other, the IEP team wants to draw PEU's attention to the examples of good practice and suggest a more organised approach at central university level to the benefit of all students.

4.3 Recommendations

- Develop and institutionalise cross-disciplinarity between faculties.

- Systematically implement more innovative didactic methods.

- Offer more English courses and programmes.

5. Research

Following the general approach of the IEP, the team focused in its evaluation on the alignment of PEU's research activities with its mission and goals and the management of these research activities. The topic of research played a particular role during the evaluation because of its core relevance for PEU as a small university to reach its aims to become by 2026:

"- A university in Slovakia with internationally respected scientific research and development, artistic and creative activities. (…)
- a university that is recognised in international rankings of universities around the world."

The IEP team identified several good research activities. A look at the five best publications per faculty demonstrates that researchers publish both on a national and international level, although there still seems to be an emphasis on the national level. Improvement in the internationalisation of research requires further developments as mentioned in the following paragraphs. A noteworthy achievement of PEU are its strong relations with private companies for applied research and innovation.

5.1 Alignment of research activities with mission and goals

Working towards PEU's long-term goal "to become one of the world's leading universities" requires a comprehensive strategic approach and substantial efforts, particularly in the field of research. Two important aspects are the strategic choice of partners and the strategic use of institutional, national and European research funding opportunities — a requirement for universities in general to successfully develop and optimise profile and research activities output. The team emphasises that, for a university of PEU's size and research output, this is a long way to go, even with a well-developed strategy.

The team acknowledges PEU's efforts to strengthen research and increase its research output by measures such as the requirements for every teacher to have at least one publication per year, or the aim to increase international publications. However, the team identified a certain mismatch of current approaches with the aims of the university.

Firstly, the goals listed in the Long-term Plan to be achieved by 2026 are not realistic for a university of PEU's size and state of development in research. Furthermore, both the goals and the tools appear to be too vague or general to guide a planned development. Especially the list of tools appears often as a list of possible activities rather than a list of measures to be taken. Becoming *a university that is recognised in international rankings of universities around the world* would require significantly more precise guidelines. The weakness of the Long-term Plan mentioned in chapter two is especially relevant for the area of research.

Secondly, the IEP team found a substantial lack of strategic planning at central university level of how the research profile is to develop in the upcoming years. A common characteristic of many measures to strengthen research and increase research output is the focus on individual researchers. Structural measures or overarching policies are much less developed. Although research activities driven by individual interests of researchers is a usual feature of all universities, the team considers it not sufficient if the university wants to grow. At PEU, creating critical mass for larger-scale research, whether by identifying research fields to be pursued in a midterm or even long-term perspective, or building necessary capacities in terms of numbers of researchers and research infrastructure, could be identified only in very few cases. Even in these cases, this is merely the result of individual preferences or collaboration at faculty level, rather than part of a pro-active strategy at university level.

The crucial role of the faculties in translating the Long-term Plan into future activities independently from other universities and prioritisation of this goal from the central university might support and benefit individual research activities. However, the team found that this purely bottom-up approach is neither sufficient nor appropriate for the ambitions of the university. In this context, it is normal that volume and quality of research outputs varies substantially between faculties. However, the team found no indication that this is being intended, accepted or considered an issue. The IEP team was surprised that the law faculty was presented as the strongest faculty in research, given that research in law has naturally a large national component, which limits the potential of internationally cited articles, etc. During the site visit, the team learned that the faculty of informatics was considered to have the biggest research potentials for the future because of Bratislava being a hub in this field. However, neither law nor informatics were presented as strategic priorities.

Thirdly, an unfavourable framework condition mentioned by PEU frequently during the site visit was the discrimination against or even exclusion of private universities from the national funding schemes for research at universities. As mentioned earlier, public funding is without doubt a key success factor for universities to increase their research output. However, the IEP team found PEU's efforts to respond to this issue unconvincing. The IEP team noted the relative absence of reference in the self-evaluation report and accompanying documentation, as well as in discussions during the site visits, to the multitude of European research funding streams and support services which can be of assistance in the internationalisation of research such as the Euraxess researcher mobility network and the Human Resources Excellence in Research label, which will become a pre-condition for successful European research funding in the near future. Furthermore, simply forwarding European calls for research projects to scientific staff does not constitute a strategic approach. In conclusion, the IEP team identified a significant strategic weakness which starts with goals that are not realistic, considering the current framework conditions for and output of PEU's research activities. This makes achievement of the goals very difficult. Furthermore, the team couldn't find a solid analysis of strengths in research which could form the basis of a strategy that would identify areas of strengths to be prioritised and developed, as well as other areas to be developed. Consequently, the Long-term Plan does not give enough orientation.

5.2 Management of research activities

The management of research activities is coordinated by the vice-rector for research in close collaboration with the deans and vice-deans who have the main responsibility at faculty level. PEU offers support from the central university level through a small, dedicated research office with three staff members, whose role is to inform staff about calls and provide administrative support for project applications. Research is organised in the faculty and department structures without specific research centres or similar infrastructure.

The activities to support research activities are manifold, however limited in volume; they start with contractual regulations that assure capacity of individual staff to pursue research. While teaching hours are determined by law and there are no fixed regulations in staff contracts, PEU policy aims at reserving an average of 40% of the workload for research activities. The IEP team highlights that PEU uses a financial incentive to support research, as parts of the salaries are based on research output during the previous year. Although the performance-based fraction of the salary is rather small, as the team was informed, it nonetheless emphasises the relevance of research. Furthermore,

according to an internal policy, newly recruited young staff have to teach in English. Financial support was reported to be provided on a regular basis in form of support for publications and participation in conferences, etc.; however, the team learned that there is no dedicated research budget and financial support does not follow transparent regulations. Although researchers confirmed that it was not difficult to receive these kinds of support, the IEP team found that a transparent policy would be necessary.

In general, research activities are financed by third-party funds, mainly national funding schemes, whereas there is little inhouse-funding of research projects. Researchers frequently reported that they were referred to external project funding schemes when asking for financial support on a larger scale. The *Programme to support science and research at the Pan-European University* approved in late 2022 has a somewhat misleading title because it is mainly a policy to evaluate research activities at faculty level. It is not a policy that comprises financial, administrative or organisational support measures.

In conclusion, the team found that PEU applies some useful approaches to support its research activities, but these are rather less formalised, while systematic policies and support do not reach the scale necessary to achieve the university's ambitious aims. This is especially true for opportunities to fund research inhouse. Because of the importance of doctoral students as early-career researchers for research output of universities, the team also directed its attention toward doctoral education at PEU.

PEU offers seven doctoral programmes in four out of five faculties; only the faculty of informatics does not have a doctoral programme. The team was informed that after an unsuccessful attempt to obtain accreditation for a doctoral programme, the faculty intends to make a new attempt. In total, 64 doctoral students are enrolled, a high number, given the general size of the university.

Doctoral programmes are organised by the respective faculties. During the online meetings and the site visit, the team was informed that the national accreditation regulations prevent the university from establishing a doctoral school as accreditation is based on programmes. It is also this restriction that drives PEU to obtain institutional accreditation, to gain more flexibility. The IEP team learned that doctoral education largely follows the traditional model of individual tutoring.

While doctoral students confirmed that the good student experience with the individualised approach applies also to the doctoral phase, the team noted that, nonetheless, communication and collaboration across the doctoral programmes were highly welcomed. The IEP team was surprised to find that the site visit was the first time that doctoral students met their colleagues from other programmes.

Doctoral education has undergone substantial structural reforms in the past 20 years, partly induced by integration into the three-tier system of higher education in the EHEA. The organisation of doctoral education in structures such as doctoral schools has spread across the EHEA. The IEP team is convinced that PEU should pursue all possible options to give doctoral students the opportunity to meet and share experiences. This enriches the academic experience for doctoral students. Even lacking a doctoral school, the university could foster this shared experience by making sure that courses in doctoral programmes such as academic writing, research methods, research ethics, etc., bring all doctoral students together in the classroom.

PEU should be aware that it competes for doctoral students with universities at both European and international levels and that doctoral schools (or similar structures) would clearly strengthen its position.

The team was struck that, in principle, doctoral students finance their research activities themselves if they are not part of an externally funded research project. Although off- and on-campus access to relevant literature data bases is generally cost-free for the students, the lack of financial support is clearly a weakness.

Regarding linking research and teaching, the university is to be commended for its policy to motivate doctoral students to teach in the study programmes and for efforts to include mainly master's students in research activities, not least in the faculty of informatics where there is no doctoral programme. Students appreciated these opportunities.

5.4 Recommendations

- Strategically develop research areas in terms of international partnerships and funding opportunities.

- Take necessary steps to develop a doctoral school.

- Introduce common courses on academic writing, research ethics etc., at a central university level.

- Take steps to apply for HRS4R (Human Resources Strategy for Researchers) label.

6. Service to society

The IEP team explored how PEU seeks to serve the society beyond its core activities in educating and training students and in conducting research. The team examined PEU's broader institutional aims and objectives in this area, and the specific activities it carries out to achieve these.

In its Long-term Plan, PEU included a chapter, "Knowledge Transfer, Cooperation with Public Administration, Private Sector, and Impact on the Development of Society", which focuses on knowledge transfer and cooperation with employers in the teaching process. Although one of the sub-objectives is "to act as a public forum for discussion of academic and societal issues", the team found that PEU would benefit from a clearer understanding of service to society or the third mission of a university. During the last couple of years, service to society has become an important mission of European higher education institutions and features also as a requirement in many funding schemes.

The material provided by PEU, especially the SER, does not show that there is a shared understanding, comprehensive strategy or programme of third mission.

This became clear to the team when, during the site visit, it learned about a variety of activities, while the SER presented only brief or even no information about the *University of Third Age* or further education courses for the public, compared to more detailed information about teaching and learning.

Only some of the activities are mentioned here:

- University of third age with lectures on a great diversity of topics;

- Further education courses in various fields for upskilling and personal growth;

- Series of public lectures by the law faculty ("On Coffee with...") and public events such as the conference "Truth, Lies and Freedom of Speech: 30 Years after the Fall of Totalitarianism";

- Legal advice to members of minorities in the country;

- Pan-European Children's University day camp, traditionally organised together with partners;

- Annual FIRST LEGO League youth engineering competition;

- Regular art exhibitions at its premises;

- Blood donation events.

The IEP team commends PEU for the variety and number of activities and especially for including students. Stakeholders who were met by the team conveyed their appreciation of these activities and confirmed not only their relevance but also the important role played by PEU in outreach toward the community and society at large.

These findings during the site visit were in strong contrast to the presentation in the SER. In summary, the IEP team found that PEU does not give its service to society activities the emphasis that they deserve. It was obvious to the team that activities follow initiatives at department or at faculty level without any integrative policy. From the perspective of the IEP team, there is considerable opportunity to build on current activities and turn them into a strength. At the same time, the university should reconsider the emphasis it gives to service to society and how best to communicate third mission activities.

Recommendations

- Continue and strengthen activities in service to society.

- Develop a dedicated strategy and plan at central university level.

- Communicate better the achievements in this area.

7. Internationalisation

In its Long-term Plan, PEU states as primary objective in the field of internationalisation "to consolidate the position of the Pan-European University within the international space of university education providers and to develop international activities and cooperation with partners abroad at the highest possible level." Among the sub-objectives are implementation of joint programmes and increasing the mobility of students and teachers.

The latter was mentioned in the SER as a key means to establish the university "in the international environment". During the site visit, the IEP team learned that, in general, international mobility was the aspect most referred to. Regarding the size of the university, numbers such as roughly 80 outgoing and 65 incoming students per year is quite an achievement. This applies also to international staff mobility so that the team found that PEU makes good use of different action lines of Erasmus+.

To develop these activities, PEU has an active International Cooperation Department that supports and administers mobilities.

Despite these achievements, the IEP team found that PEU's concept of internationalisation is primarily focused on mobility, leaving other aspects underdeveloped. This applies not least to one aspect of what is often referred to as *internationalisation at home,* namely study programmes offered in English. Although individual courses are offered in English in various programmes, there is only one study programme that offers a fully English-taught track, namely International Relations and Diplomacy. Given the small number of Slovak speakers around the world, English study programmes would significantly support the internationalisation of PEU's student body, which PEU names as one of its objectives. Also, the current focus on two regions, East/South-east Asia and Central America, didn't seem to be grounded in strategic deliberations.

Another underdeveloped aspect of internationalisation is to be found in the field of research, where there is clearly room for improvement. This was mentioned previously in the chapters about strategy and research, and links back to the university's ambitious aims. The IEP team found that PEU should broaden its activities and increase its efforts to internationalise its research activities through close partnerships and joint research programmes. This should be based on a solid internationalisation strategy, which the PEU has yet to produce.

Recommendations

- Build more sustainable partnerships with respected foreign universities for research and mobility.

- Motivate and support staff to enhance foreign language skills.

- Establish more English-taught programmes and courses.

8. Conclusion

As detailed in this report, the IEP team found achievements and positive developments underway at PEU in every area of evaluation. The team wishes to highlight some distinctive features of the university, namely that PEU:

- has an admirable goal, which is to prevent the brain drain from the Slovak Republic;

- is highly valued by its students;

- is particularly valued by the students, stakeholders, and partners for the integration of theoretical and practical learning;

- operates successfully despite an unfavourable legal and political situation for private universities in the country;

- is recognised by their community as a successful private university and pioneer;

- has committed and professional teachers and academic staff; and

- is committed to improving its quality.

The team hopes that this IEP evaluation can support future enhancement at the university, particularly regarding PEU's aim to strengthen its research capacity and research output. The IEP team is convinced that:

- the newly built QA system helps to identify some weaknesses and challenges, and

- the institution would benefit from a more comprehensive approach that integrates all aspects of strategic planning, operationalising and monitoring.

The university is ambitious to the benefit of its students and the society. Reaching its aims will require substantial efforts in a long-term perspective. More steps should follow. As one interviewee mentioned: "This evaluation is a logical step in the further development of the institution." The team wishes the PEU community every success in this endeavour.

Summary of the recommendations

The key recommendations presented in the previous chapters are summarised below for easy identification.

In terms of governance and institutional decision making:

- Include milestones in the next Long-term Plan, assure a better alignment of an operational plan with the Long-term Plan and implement a formalised monitoring of its implementation at central university level.

- Assure stronger leadership of the central university level in strategic planning.

- Develop a strategy of growth that addresses especially implications of future growth in student numbers and research activities on existing structure and processes.

In terms of quality culture:

- Harmonise indicators used for quality assurance and for measuring achievements in the Long-term Plan.

- Consider additional or alternative feedback tools for students such as focus groups, student panels, etc., and build trust in confidentiality and effectiveness of feedback tools.

- Strengthen information about follow-up activities and use social media channels.

- Keep the audience in mind when writing reports.

In terms of teaching and learning:

- Develop and institutionalise cross-disciplinarity between faculties.

- Systematically implement more innovative didactic methods.

- Offer more English courses and programmes.

In terms of research:

- Strategically develop research areas in terms of international partnerships and funding opportunities.

- Take necessary steps to develop a doctoral school.

- Introduce common courses on academic writing, research ethics etc., at a central university level.

- Take steps to apply for HRS4R (Human Resources Strategy for Researchers) label.

In terms of service to society:

- Continue and strengthen activities in service to society.

- Develop a dedicated strategy and plan at central university level.

- Communicate better the achievements in this area.

In terms of internationalisation:

- Build more sustainable partnerships with respected foreign universities for research and mobility.

- Motivate and support staff to enhance foreign language skills.

- Establish more English-taught programmes and courses.