

**Nazarbayev University**

***EVALUATION REPORT***

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## **Contents**

1. Introduction .....	3
3. Governance and institutional decision-making.....	7
4. Quality culture .....	11
5. Teaching and learning .....	13
6. Research .....	16
7. Service to society.....	17
8. Internationalisation .....	20
9. Conclusion .....	21
10. Summary of the recommendations.....	22

## **1. Introduction**

This report is the result of the evaluation of Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. The evaluation took place in spring 2017, with the first site visit on 27 March-1 April and the second visit on 8-13 May.

### **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 Nazarbayev University’s profile**

Kazakhstan signed up to the Bologna Process in 2010, becoming the 47<sup>th</sup> members of the European Higher Education Area, 19 years after the country became the Republic of Kazakhstan, an independent state following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The move was part of the general national strategy to modernise the country, in which education was assigned a leading role. Key measures in higher education included the introduction of the

three-cycle structure of Bachelor, Master and PhD studies; setting up a National Accreditation Centre under the Ministry of Education and Science that was later was succeeded by independent accreditation agencies; and starting a scholarship programme known as “Bolashak” (“the Future”) to support students to study abroad and channel their experiences back into the country. More than 11 000 students have studied abroad under the scheme since 1993.

Nazarbayev University (NU) was established in 2010, four years after the first president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, announced in his annual address to the nation his plan to create “the first research and world-class university in Kazakhstan” (Self-Evaluation Report p.1). A bold national “Strategy 2050” aims for Kazakhstan to rank among the top 30 developed countries in the world by the end of the period, and building up a strong human resource base through modern education and health care systems stands as the first of seven national priorities. NU is intended to serve as a model higher education institution for the country while producing graduates who can lead the nation forward in public administration, health care, and other fields and professions. In order to ensure the success of its mission, NU was given a unique legal status with a separate law granting it institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and instituting a Board of Trustees within a governance structure independent of the Ministry of Education and Science. NU is not required to seek licensing via accreditation by the national agencies but some programmes will be applying for international accreditation. It is free to recruit and select students according to its own requirements. Moreover, the university receives a generous budget from the state, which made up 92% of its total funding in 2016, according to Appendix 10 of the NU self-evaluation report (hereafter referred to as SER). During its site visits the IEP evaluation team (hereafter named the team) heard that NU’s budget makes up around 20% of the total state budget for higher education. At the same time as NU’s establishment, a “Nazarbayev Fund” was set up as an endowment with donations from multinational companies. The Fund is managed independently from NU and it can use the income from the investments at its discretion.

NU was established through a scheme in which the initially project group formed partnerships between NU and universities in the UK, the United States and elsewhere. The partners’ task was to help design the university structure and its first study programmes, and to bring academic staff to NU. The strategic partnerships continue with most schools (as faculties are referred to, in line with the US model) being linked to an international university. The list of partners has also expanded to other countries and continents. They include the University of Cambridge, University of Wisconsin-Madison and the National University of Singapore, and, as research partners, the University of Pittsburgh, to name a few.

NU has eight schools, including undergraduate schools for Science and Technology; Engineering; Humanities and Social Sciences (all three also offer graduate programmes); and Mining and Geosciences, and graduate schools for Public Policy; Business, and Education. The newest addition is the School of Mining and Geosciences, which was inaugurated in 2017. The university also has research centres, with the Centre for Energy Research (renamed Centre for

Energy and Advanced Materials Science) and the Centre for Life Sciences established in 2010. The Schools of Education, Engineering, and Science and Technology offer PhD programmes.

In autumn 2015, 2 644 students were enrolled in NU, and this had risen to 3 714 at the time of writing the SER in autumn 2016. The team was told that the student population is planned to expand to around 8 000 over the coming years. As of 2015, 99.7% of students were Kazakhstan citizens, and the male-female ratio is 1:1. Tuition is free for most undergraduate and graduate students. The academic staff numbered 371 as of autumn 2016. Unlike the student population, 78% of them are expatriate, predominantly from North America but also from Europe and Asia. The 302 members of administrative staff employed by NU are almost all Kazakhstani, and many of those in higher administrative positions studied abroad under the Bolashak scheme.

NU is situated in Astana, the nation's rapidly growing, modern capital since 1998. The university comprises a sprawling modern building complex with possibilities for expansion. It includes teaching and research facilities as well as student dormitories, faculty housing, and sports, recreation and service facilities. A new, expansive Technopark next- to NU is being built, some of which is already in operation.

The language of instruction at NU is English, and entrance requirements include passing a Cambridge Testing Service-designed exam. Even with the rigorous entrance screening, NU opted to launch a so-called "foundation programme" in September 2010, in which some 85% of incoming students now participate, concentrating on learning various subjects and the basis of research in English. The foundation year is considered a success, leading to a progression rate topping 80% and so will be continued in the future.

### **1.3 The evaluation process**

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a 12-member Self-Evaluation Group of academics, administrative staff and one student. The SER provided the team with an insight into the unique make-up of the university and the national context. It also gave the team ample analysis of NU's current strengths and weaknesses, while suggesting thorough self-reflection that is at the core of any self-evaluation process. Indeed, there are some issues in the SER that the team has not explored since they were identified by NU and in many cases they already suggested solutions.

The first visit in March allowed the team to familiarise itself with NU, its leadership, academic and administrative staff, and students. In addition to the Provost and Head of the Quality Unit, the team met the Self-Evaluation Group, the deans, staff and students of four schools, Student Support Services, Executive Management, Research Services and Finance and Legal Services. In the second visit in May, the team conducted focus groups to discuss specific issues: research agenda, human capital, and service to society, with small groups of 10-12 persons which included leadership, staff and students. In separate meetings, the team spoke with members of the Academic Council, the Managing Council, the Board of Trustees, the Academic Quality Unit and the two-member institutional research unit. The SER of NU, together with the

appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2017. Following the first visit, a second set of information and data was supplied to the team at its request.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Kristina Varantola, former Rector of Tampere University, Finland, Team Chair
- Simona Dimovska, International Officer for Quality Assurance in the Student Union of Macedonia
- Erdal Emel, former Vice-Rector of Uludağ University, Turkey
- Karol Izydor Wysokiński, former Vice-Rector of UMCS Lublin, Poland
- Christina Rozsnyai, Programme Officer for Foreign Affairs, Hungarian Accreditation Committee, Team Coordinator

The team thanks President Shigeo Katsu and Provost Ilesanmi Adesida, the Self-Evaluation Group and all NU colleagues for their contribution to the evaluation process and for their kind hospitality. The team would also like to thank Duncan Priestley, Head of Academic Quality Enhancement, and Aizhan Mussina, Senior Manager, Office of the Provost, for their organisation of the site visits, and staff, students and partners of NU for the open and frank discussions with the team.

## **2. Governance and institutional decision-making**

As a model university for Kazakhstan with a national remit, NU carries a burden of responsibility while enjoying special privileges that set it apart from other universities in the country. To quote from the NU Strategy 2013-2020, “President Nazarbayev tasked NU with setting ‘a national standard of higher education for the rest of the country’ and by doing so to lead the process of reforming and modernizing Kazakhstan’s higher education system.” Hence, NU’s vision is “to give Kazakhstan and the world the scientists, academics, managers and entrepreneurs they need to prosper and develop”. Specifically, its mission is “to be a model for higher education reform and modern research in Kazakhstan and to contribute to the establishment of Astana as an international innovation and knowledge hub”. To achieve its mission, NU operates under five strategic mandates, again from the Strategy 2013-2020:

- Goal I: Educational reform leadership  
To ensure that the lessons of NU’s experience are transferred and understood by other universities, schools and research centres
- Goal II: Academic Excellence  
To achieve NU’s mission by developing and maintaining academic excellence
- Goal III: Research Excellence  
To develop a programme of world-class research by partnering with the world’s best researchers and research institutions
- Goal IV: Creating a Model for Healthcare Services  
To establish a healthcare system that will provide a model for healthcare services throughout Kazakhstan
- Goal V: Innovation and Translating Research into Production  
To become Kazakhstan’s main driver of innovation, leading the way for Astana to become a regional hub of innovation.

The team found during its interviews with various groups of university members that a sense of responsibility, coupled with enthusiasm for NU’s mission and goals, pervades the leadership, staff and students alike. A high degree of integrity and merit-based approach in all activities can be observed, which is key for setting an example in an external environment where corruption is not uncommon. There are many precautions in place to ensure transparency in procedures, e.g. the entrance examination for incoming students is outsourced to the Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing and to the British Council. NU promotes inclusivity in an approach that extends to facilities and learning tools for disabled students as well as social support for talented students from socially vulnerable backgrounds; the team learned that some 400 socially vulnerable students, who represent over 10% of the student population, receive free housing from NU. In total, around 85% of students have access to on-campus accommodation. Moreover, students are provided with health insurance beyond the national health plans.

The team commends NU for the high quality of its students and academic staff. The latter, who are predominantly foreigners, are dedicated to the success of what they see as an interesting

project, i.e. contributing to a national experiment. The publication list with which the team was provided is impressive and the staff output emanates not only from their previous positions but includes research carried out at NU. The quality of NU's partners, some listed above, speak for the quality of the academic staff recruited partially through them.

Students are a carefully selected group who also are keenly aware of the opportunities open to them as future graduates of NU. The excellent buildings and facilities, the teaching infrastructure, and student housing and services contribute to the appreciation and dedication of staff and students to the university.

The team received the NU Strategy 2013-2020 as well as a recently updated 2017-2020 strategy. An operation plan translating the strategy into action and assigning deadlines and responsibilities is in place, and actions are on track as planned. Numerous other guidelines, rules and regulations for various activities and groups encompass the by-laws of the various management units, promotion regulations, student conduct guides, handbooks for undergraduate and graduate students, among others. In fact, the team found that these documents were extremely numerous and detailed but was told that in the local administrative environment this was a necessity. There is a dichotomy in mentality and responsibility between the predominantly foreign academic staff and the predominantly local administrative staff who are bound by the local financial and administrative regulations. It seemed that there was little face-to-face communication between the international researchers and the administrative personnel dealing with travel allocations and procurement issues, which leads to a lack of trust between the two groups. Therefore, the team recommends that NU *review its processes regularly to make sure that all sectors of the university continue to work for the same goals*. The team asked NU to consider whether all multiple signatures are really required by law and how the system could be streamlined within the existing legislation.

The governance structure of NU is unique to Kazakhstan and follows a mixture of American and European models. There is a Supreme Board of Trustees, which is the so-called "supreme governing body" of NU, an external group of currently 9 members that in effect stands in place of the ministry that oversees other higher education institutions but not NU. It is headed by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and approves the long-term strategy and appoints the members of the Board of Trustees.

The governing body of NU is the Board of Trustees, a body composed of between 7 and 21 national and international members, according to the NU Charter. The Board of Trustees elects the President of NU, who is automatically a member of the Board. With the exception of the President of NU, whose term is set down in his business contract, Board members are elected for three-year terms, renewable once. They come from academia and politics and meet around four times a year to deal with strategic issues and approve the budget. As a renowned body, the Board of Trustees also plays a role in setting in motion legal changes by channelling experiences from NU into the sector.

The Managing Council oversees and directs NU operations. It is made up of leaders of the university and is appointed by the Board of Trustees. The President is the chief executive who answers to the Board of Trustees. The Provost, who is accountable to the President, is the chief academic officer in charge of the academic and research framework. There is also an Executive Vice-President in charge of administrative matters and Vice-Presidents for Medicine, for Student Affairs, for International Cooperation and for Innovation and Research set down in the Charter, with additional vice-presidents to be appointed as needed. The team learnt that the position of a Vice-Provost for Research is to be filled shortly. The Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs, an Academic Council and a Research Council oversee academic and research matters.

The NU schools operate under the umbrella of NU management but are internally independent with regard to their governance. The team heard that schools follow a variety of practices, which may also stem from each school being linked to a different international partner.

Similarly, research centres are structural units of NU but implement their management independently. University committees exist with specific duties to advise the Managing, the Academic and the Research Councils, while the University Council, made up of members of the other leading bodies, advises the President on strategic and operational matters. Finally, there is a Faculty Senate, which represents the academic staff and a Student Government, which represents students.

The team found the governance structure to be complex, especially given that many individuals sit on a number of bodies wearing different hats, but it understands that this arrangement serves a national strategy while ensuring academic independence. It found, however, that the division of responsibilities between the President and the Provost were not clearly implemented. This may be due to the fact that the current Provost's primary mission at this time is to build up an effective and motivating research structure in order to propel NU's research mission.

A major characteristic in the structure and everyday life of NU is the relationship with international partner institutions. The team recognises that these partners are renowned institutions and have played an invaluable role in setting up the NU structure. Moreover, they continue to provide links for recruiting academic staff and international contacts. Nevertheless, the team believes that NU has come to the point when the relationship with international partners may be changed. The comments in the survey of international partners made for the self-evaluation process provide useful ideas. "The partnership model has been successful [in establishing procedures] and now there is an appropriate move to a more collaborative or equal working with partners". The survey also mentions the need for "increasing the role and responsibility of Kazakh[stani] faculty" and that "NU should invest in an intensive development programme for local faculty so that they can move into leadership roles". These suggestions fully reflect those of the team, and it therefore recommends *discussing and negotiating with strategic partners about changes needed in partner relationships*.

The team had the impression that student representation in governance, with students in all standing committees, functions well. In general, a good rapport between students and teachers was observed, with students quite open in discussing problems.

A major obstacle in NU operations that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews, as well as in the SER, is the administrative framework and the implementation of financial regulations. The local administrative staff carries personal responsibility for major and procurements and, with regard to financial rules, NU, like other universities, answers to the Ministry of Finance. This set-up with its extensive regulatory procedures and punitive rather than enabling approach to accountability, hinders or slows down acquisitions for research and teaching and puts a burden on individuals. It also emphasises the different weights of responsibility between largely administrative staff and largely international academic staff. Frequently changing internal regulations only aggravate the sense of frustration among both academic and administrative staff.

The team heard that a management information system is being planned, which may alleviate some of the burden that is posed by a cumbersome administration of documents. The team therefore recommends *continuing plans to hire a Chief Information Officer and develop a comprehensive and university-wide information system.*

At the same time, the team observed in many discussions that internal communication could be improved on an organisational level. The team had the impression that there are actually more services, for example, to support the administration of research, than academic staff were aware of. Therefore, the team recommends *ensuring that faculty is aware of university-level support services and, if necessary, improve them.*

Along this line the team especially recommends *improving internal communication for better alignment between academic and administrative staff in a constructive fashion, both formally and informally, in order to ensure an understanding of common rules, regulations and procedures and strengthen the collaborative spirit between the two parties.*

Furthermore, the team recommends in this context *streamlining and harmonising the administrative processes and approach, investigating if more harmonisation is needed between school and central administrative processes.* The team also recommends *rethinking cooperation patterns and balance of decision-making power between academic and administrative decision-making staff.*

Finally, the team touched on the subject of sustainable funding for NU. The university is given stable and elaborate support at this time, but is aware that additional funding sources need to be exploited. A major topic within the Board of Trustees is the possible introduction of tuition fees for most students. Another topic is to seek donations from business and social organisations. While the civil sector is not yet strong in Kazakhstan, the team recommends *considering setting clear rules for donations and other private funding right from the start in order to maximise their benefit and to continue to ensure NU's integrity.*

### 3. Quality culture

NU set up a quality enhancement system in 2014 with an “Academic Quality Framework” being approved by the Academic Council in May of that year. The Framework aims to set and maintain academic standards and assure and enhance academic quality. It links to the university strategy’s goal to maintain academic excellence, and, with a clause that declares the aim to “promote an ethos of continuous improvement of learning and teaching” the Framework sows the seeds of a conscious quality culture.

There are numerous quality elements in place at NU. In addition to the range of regulations and by-laws for various governing bodies, there are regulations for annual programme monitoring and student assessment as well as a separate “Instructional Technology Strategy”. A dedicated document sets out the “Student code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures”. All documents describe the purpose, persons responsible for actions and measures to be taken.

A stringent student feedback system has been implemented for many years. Courses are evaluated at the end of each semester, and student feedback is considered in the annual reviews of teachers. The team heard in an interview with the Academic Quality Unit that student representatives are trained each year on quality issues. Students also sit in on the decision-making bodies of NU.

There is a range of data collection activities, but a systematic electronic information system is not in place. The team heard, however, that the university plan to introduce the position of Chief Information Officer, whose task will be to design and implement a university-wide database. Easy and systematic data-retrieval will certainly be needed for a functioning quality enhancement system. A very capable two-man Institutional Research team has operated under the Academic Quality Unit since 2014 and is conducting analyses on cross-cutting topics for the purpose of reviewing and improving them. A study of incoming students to better inform the development of the Foundation Programme is currently underway. The team recommends *building up the Institutional Research Unit to analyse information within a coherent quality enhancement strategy*. Institutional research is also a potential tool to validate educational reform attempts at NU’s central level.

With regards to external quality assurance, various external quality assessments take place sporadically. The team heard that ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc.) accreditation for the School of Engineering, and other measures, such as inviting external examiners in more Schools than the current two, are being considered.

The team was keenly aware of the sense of responsibility for the quality of their activities among both teachers and students at NU. The most important foundation is thus present. The team also heard from students that it was easy for them to talk to teachers about their grievances and that improvements took place quickly. The next step is to further develop the quality management system. It has to have a quality management oversight body, e.g. via the expansion of the Academic Quality Committee, and administration that develops the appropriate structures and oversees implementation of quality measures on an ongoing basis.

The Academic Quality Framework sets the quality management structure to comprise the Academic Council, the Academic Quality Committee, and school and programme committees, with the Academic Quality Enhancement Unit under the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. While these units are set up, the system is not yet fully implemented. The team therefore recommends *continuing implementing the quality enhancement system in order to fully internalise quality culture at NU; setting up a university-wide system that enforces NU strategy and priorities, and ensures a common understanding of quality while continuing to respect the specific approaches and needs of the schools, without adding additional administrative burden on staff; and bringing quality enhancement of administrative, governance, research and student services into the overarching quality enhancement system.*

Given the strong north American background at NU, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* are not in the forefront for an internal quality assurance system, although there is an awareness of this instrument. Many of the individual quality enhancement measures already in place are in line with the ESG. To quote from the SER, “NU is broadly compliant with the relevant areas of the ESG 2015, particularly: student admission, progression, recognition and certification; and, information management and public information. Improvements need to be made in both student information management and the quality and availability of public information to ensure full compliance.” As NU moves forward in implementing its quality assurance system it should keep in mind that Kazakhstan is a signatory to the Bologna Process and thus committed to using the ESG, which is a very general but overarching quality assessment guide on which a tailored system can be built. Therefore, the team recommends NU *implementing the ESG systematically in its internal quality enhancement approach.*

#### 4. Teaching and learning

A number of regulations and quality enhancement documents have been mentioned, including those governing teaching and learning and assessment. The documents reinforce the NU principles of integrity and transparency. Study programmes have been designed with the cooperation of international partners, who have thus brought international experience and practice into the university. The design and approval of programmes is a bottom-up procedure that begins in the department and is vetted at the school level, including by the school quality committee, and the planned programmes are benchmarked against similar international programmes. The vice-deans for academic affairs in schools chair the teaching and learning committees that approve study programmes at the school level. The team was informed about an ECTS template and a course template provided at least by one school, as well as market analysis conducted before introducing new programmes; in fact, some schools have and others are planning to set up an industry advisory board to support programme development. The Academic Council chaired by the Provost is the final approving authority for programmes at NU. Programmes are monitored annually, with feedback from student surveys considered.

The Foundation Programme for newly entering students was mentioned frequently and the team considers it a commendable instrument in a country seeking to establish both a foreign teaching language and a teaching and learning environment that is unfamiliar to students. Students in the first year are allowed to change majors without loss of credits. Furthermore, the team heard repeatedly that NU is working on a scheme to organise core courses for students of all schools in the vein of a liberal arts education on a narrower scale. However, the team also heard that the teaching load will pose a burden on the academic staff of some schools, which will have to be taken into consideration in the planning. The team was informed of internships in most undergraduate programmes. Masters students and doctoral students may also participate in research projects and receive salaries if they meet set study requirements.

Academic staff are hired on limited but renewable contracts, initially for three years and more recently for five years. Tenure has not yet been introduced but is being discussed. The team discussed career planning at NU with several interview groups and recommends *staking out longer-term career paths for academic staff, including the possibility for tenure, in order to ensure the sustainability of academic staff and hence the research capacity of NU*. This is especially important for attracting and retaining staff not only from abroad but regionally and nationally, and would contribute to building up senior staff, the shortage of which was pointed out in the SER. A tenure option would also help in building sustainable research objectives and research teams.

The team heard that the teaching load and promotion requirements are not differentiated for more time-consuming teaching-related activities, such as different publishing practices in different fields, for conducting and grading or marking writing-intensive courses, or for tutoring students. The team, therefore, recommends *setting in place different promotion criteria to focus as much on didactic and service merits as on research, and taking into account differences between disciplines and publishing practices*.

The team also heard about the considerable administrative burden on academic staff. This has to do in part with the minutely detailed regulations for financial procedures and procurement that has been mentioned earlier in this report, but is in part also an organisational issue. Two further recommendations from the team, therefore, are *allocating additional core administrative staff to eliminate the considerable administrative burden on academic staff and to facilitate their teaching and research work*; and *seeking ways within the regulatory structure to give deans more autonomy to use grants for the staff in their schools as they see fit*.

Teachers are offered training in various pedagogical approaches and methodologies. Indeed, these courses, including teaching in English, are open to participants from other universities, thereby contributing to NU's mission of disseminating good practice.

Teaching by various methodologies and technologies is a priority, and the strategy is set down in a dedicated strategy document adopted by the Academic Council in 2014. It is an ambitious scheme that analyses the feasibility of embedding various methods into everyday teaching and learning for a range of users. Teachers and administrative staff are also encouraged and supported in participating in international projects and events to further their skills. It was noted that the planned university-wide database would encompass an integrated student information system, and the team supports NU in *recommending building up an integrated student database*. It was noted already that NU follows a philosophy of inclusiveness that includes access for disabled students and the team saw an example of this in the elaborate facilities at the library for visually impaired users.

Goal I of NU within its mission is educational reform leadership. The Graduate School of Education, which offers one of the three PhD programmes at NU, actively serves as a model for education through professional leadership programmes for participants from other universities, which are funded separately from the NU budget. The graduate school conducts extensive research on education.

Goal IV of NU is the improvement of health care. This is also in line with a national level strategy and NU is given a key role in achieving this mission. The new building of the School of Medicine was inaugurated in spring 2017. It is linked with the University Medical Centre, incorporating four hospitals and three research centres with the "goal of improvement of public health through the integration of education, science and clinical practice; and introducing innovative approaches in the prevention, diagnostics and treatment of various diseases, and providing an international level of medical care in Astana and areas beyond", according to their website. The team heard that as a model, the heads of the Medical School and Medical Centre act as formal advisors to the Ministry of Health, which contributes in part to their funding. The four hospitals of the University Medical Centre train not only NU students but also some from other universities. The Medical School hospitals are accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI), according to the NU School of Medicine website. The Medical School also acts as a consultant to six medical schools around the country that have adapted the NU model. The team commends NU for its early-stage development establishing a model for other medical schools and appreciates the innovative cooperation model with hospitals for further training.

The team observed that NU offers good student and career services where students are provided with advice and development opportunities as well as counselling. Nevertheless, students mentioned that finding the right office for the right service can sometimes be time-consuming and frustrating. The team recommends *setting up a single student services office where the allocation of the service is done internally and which would reduce the administrative burden on students*. The team also heard from graduate students that they are not offered dedicated career advice, and therefore the team recommends *expanding these services to graduate students*.

Finally, the team found that information for students, staff and external interested parties, including, beyond study information, the student and faculty handbooks and advising centre offerings, is available via a clearly structured website.

## 5. Research

Research is a key component of NU for fulfilling its Goal III: Research Excellence and Goal V: Innovation and Translating Research into Production. Research has been identified as a weak link within NU just as it is the most crucial area in need of development if NU is to attain its goal as a recognised research university. NU is keenly aware of this, and the current, recently hired Provost is in the process of developing the research structure. The team was impressed by his plans and initial actions. A Vice-Provost for Research is to be taken on and an Associate Provost for Graduate Studies is to be hired to ensure coherence and interdisciplinarity across the different schools and research centres. Local research is evolving, and while the team was provided with an extensive list of ongoing or completed research projects at the NU schools, not all of the impressive publications of the academic staff reflects research conducted during their time at NU. The team was provided with sweeping and ambitious plans for improving research organisation and facilitating output.

Research centres are separate entities and not integrated into the university “ecosystem”. This is due to the history of NU, as it incorporated independent research centres when the university was established. The National Laboratory of Astana incorporates the Centre for Life Sciences and the Centre for Energy Research and Advanced Material Sciences, which are funded by the state, and there is a separate National Analytical Centre that provides consulting and analytical services for government and private clients. The “Nazarbayev University Research and Innovation System” (NURIS) is a private institution that was transformed in 2016 from a research centre incorporated into NU at the time of the university’s founding. NURIS is the organisational link with technology and research transfer and will, when fully developed, encompass a Business Incubator, Commercialisation Office, Science Park Astana Business Campus, and a Technopark.

The research staff at NU comprises both academics and researchers affiliated with the centres. Seeing a gap between the independent research centres and the research carried out in the individual schools, the team recommends *working out how links can be established between the national research centres and NU to achieve a synergy and research opportunities for staff and graduate students*. The team also noted that there were few signs of team formation among the researchers, instead individual researchers seem to be working on individual projects. For sustainable research efforts and world-class research groups, NU needs to be more strategic and have long-term goals. Therefore, the team recommends *developing research strategies and sustainable research teams, as well as cooperation arrangements between schools, research institutes and laboratory facilities*.

The team heard repeatedly about the hurdles in funding and procurement, particularly with regards to research. While research is funded competitively, all financial allocation of state funds is subject to national regulations. As noted, the administrative staff, consisting mainly of Kazakhstanis, hold individual responsibility for expenditures and are thus reluctant to allow procurement without following the extensive bureaucratic procedures in place. The team had the sense that beyond the regulatory environment there is a lack of *trust between the local*

*administrative staff and the international academics and would recommend working on increasing such trust. It also recommends, knowing full well that it is easier said than done, making it easier to use allocated research funds from non-state sources, within set rules but exploiting them as much as possible.*

Teaching and administrative loads pose a challenge for research by academic staff, and the team found that research support services could be improved. Currently, the primary task of the Research Services Office is to administer research funds. The team thus recommends *expanding research support services to help staff with proposals, fund allocations, etc.*

In order to improve the conditions for research the team has a set of further recommendations that largely build on what NU has itself already identified: *make every effort to implement the ambitious research plans by, e.g. attracting top research teams and individuals; implement plans to set up post-doc and research assistant positions with career plans for NU graduates; create opportunities for Kazakhstani and international PhD candidates and post-docs to work in an international research environment at NU.*

When it comes to research evaluation, the team recommends creating milestones and indicators for the ambitious research strategy implementation covering individual researchers, research groups and the university. Furthermore, the team would like to refer to a recently issued EU guideline for responsible research entitled the “ALLEA Revised Code of Conduct for Research Integrity” and adopted by the EU Commission for the Horizon 2020 research programme. The team recommends its implementation at NU.

## **6. Service to society**

It is NU's mission to serve society in a number of ways:

- it is a model for higher education in its structure and operations in line with Goal I
- it contributes to general education reform, also in line with Goal I, through its Graduate School of Education projects and graduates
- it produces graduates, as stated in NU's vision, "to give Kazakhstan and the world the scientists, academics, managers and entrepreneurs they need to prosper and develop"
- it becomes "Kazakhstan's main driver of innovation" in line with Goal V by ensuring knowledge transfer through its industrial and business affiliates
- it "provide[s] a model for healthcare services throughout Kazakhstan" in line with Goal IV through its Medical School and University Medical Centre

The set-up of NU outreach activities serves as a model in a number of ways. The team heard repeatedly that the leadership and staff, especially from the Graduate School of Public Policy, consult frequently with lawmakers and influence the modernisation of legislation. The Board of Trustees model has been adopted in the legislation for implementation by other universities by 2020.

It was evident to the team that the staff and students of NU study and work with this mission in the front of their minds. Schools are active in transmitting their knowledge and experiences through numerous scientific and social events such as training courses, workshops and seminars. Administrative departments, such as the Career Advising Centre or the Department of Student Affairs, as well as Office of the Provost, Office of Registrar and Library, conduct workshops to disseminate their practices. The Graduate School of Education has conducted training sessions for university managers and officials from the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as for teachers. It is also a contributor to general education curriculum reform together with the ministry.

The School of Medicine established strategic partnerships with six medical universities in the country to modernise medical education by offering training courses to their managers. Moreover, its hospitals and clinics serve the public at large. By integrating the University Medical Centre with the three hospitals, as well as the Research Centre for Life Sciences, medical research finds its application in the treatment of patients.

NURIS, as the organisational link between the university and technology and research transfer, is being built up to encompass business and production enterprises ultimately catering for the public. It already offers services with some resident companies and has facilities for start-ups that support young entrepreneurs by providing facilities, training and seed money. The team noted the enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit of NU students.

The team commends NU for fulfilling the expectations laid on it as a model institution and recommends *ensuring that it continues to make its societal activities visible in order to ensure ongoing good will.*

## 7. Internationalisation

NU is an international university in some respects. At the moment, over three quarters of its academic staff come from outside Kazakhstan. Since its establishment it has worked with partner universities in other countries and all schools work with a leading partner. These partnerships entail not only the university structure, programme design and incoming staff but are also ongoing relationships that involve know-how, knowledge transfer, contacts for the leadership, staff and students. International research projects with partners from all parts of the world make up a large part of NU research. Several international scientific conferences have been held at NU.

While the student body is almost exclusively Kazakhstani, many of those whom the team interviewed had been abroad to study for various periods of time with the support of business and international partners. The team heard, however, that only a small number of students have this opportunity, not least for financial reasons, even though NU has access to the ERASMUS+ scheme and other similar programmes. The major weakness that NU has already identified itself is the lack of international students coming to the university. NU states in its SER, “It is clear that NU has come to a stage where internationalisation is a priority,” and has included it in its Strategy 2013-2020. NU has made efforts to enhance international partnerships and joint research groups as discussed earlier. In order to move internationalisation forward NU has produced a “Concept Note on Internationalisation” and set up a Committee on Internationalisation. Measures needed include a university support structure that extends to the school level, or at least to some departments where internationalisation is not currently a priority.

To facilitate the visibility of NU internationally, it might explore the possibilities for marketing the university in international study fairs, websites and elsewhere. A professional marketing department could be explored for this purpose.

In order to move forward, the team recommends that NU *maintain and develop mutually beneficial international contacts and continue to explore mobility opportunities for young staff and students*. It supports NU in recommending *striving to increase attracting international students through the planned summer school scheme and other initiatives, as well as increasing student mobility*.

## **8. Conclusion**

The team commends NU for the progress it has made in fulfilling its role as a model university in just six years. The success of its graduates is one important indication: the SER states that “48% have gone on to further education, 43% to employment and 6% are seeking employment.” The growing student body, the recruited leadership and staff, the teaching and research activities, and the facilities that the team has seen are just as admirable as the place NU has established for itself in the higher education sector and among national decision-makers. As with all successful small enterprises, stepping up to the next level is a challenge for NU. Sustainability – of political support, financing, staff – has to be tackled step by step. Creating a common understanding of NU culture between academic and administrative staff; encouraging a trusting and cooperative mentality; diversifying income sources; and ensuring sustained support when a future government takes office are all crucial. The merit-based principles in recruitment and the spirit of integrity that is integral to NU today should continue to be nurtured. Building up a solid research base that can respond to strategic research targets with a critical mass of long-term academic staff should be a goal. And importantly, a simplified procurement system that changes from a punitive to an awarding mentality would remove a major immediate hurdle.

To underpin the success of NU’s journey the team would like to quote a comment by a partner from the partner survey conducted for the NU self-evaluation exercise: “Society must embrace risk and failure, lower barriers to entry and consequences to entrepreneurs and remove bureaucratic hurdles. The stability of academic leadership is very important.”

## **9. Summary of the recommendations**

### **Governance and decision-making**

1. Given the dichotomy between predominantly foreign academic staff and primarily local administrative staff and students, review processes should take place regularly to make sure that all sectors of the university continue to work for the same goals.
2. Discuss and negotiate with strategic partners about changes needed in partner relationships.
3. Continue plans to hire a Chief Information Officer and develop a comprehensive and university-wide information system that includes building up an integrated student database.
4. Ensure that faculty is aware of university-level support services and, if necessary, improve them.
5. Improve internal communication for better alignment between academic and administrative staff in a constructive fashion, both formally and informally, in order to ensure an understanding of common rules, regulations and procedures and strengthen the collaborative spirit between the two parties.
6. Streamline and harmonise administrative processes and approach, investigate if more harmonisation is needed between school and central administrative processes. Additionally, rethink cooperation patterns and balance of decision-making power between academic and administrative decision-making staff.
7. Set clear rules for donation and other private funding in order to maximise their benefit and to continue to ensure NU's integrity.

### **Quality culture**

8. Build up the Institutional Research Unit to analyse information within a coherent quality enhancement strategy.
9. Continue implementing the quality enhancement system in order to fully internalise quality culture at NU. Set up a university-wide system that enforces NU strategy and priorities, and ensures a common understanding of quality while continuing to respect the specific approaches and needs of the schools, but without adding additional administrative burden on staff.
10. Bring quality enhancement of administrative, governance, research and student services into the overarching quality enhancement system.
11. Implement the ESG systematically in the internal quality enhancement approach.

### **Teaching and learning**

12. Stake out longer-term career paths for academic staff, including the possibility for tenure, in order to ensure the sustainability of academic staff and the research capacity of NU.
13. Set in place different promotion criteria to focus as much on didactic and service merits as on research, and take into account differences between disciplines and publishing practices.
14. Allocate additional core administrative staff to eliminate the considerable administrative burden on academic staff and to facilitate their teaching and research work.
15. Give deans more autonomy to use grants for the staff in their schools as they see fit.
16. Set up a single student services office where the allocation of the service is done internally and which would reduce the administrative burden on students.
17. Expand career services to graduate students.

### **Research**

18. Work on increasing trust between the local administrative staff and the international academics.
19. Work out how links can be established between the national research centres and NU to achieve a synergy and research opportunities for staff and graduate students.
20. Develop research strategies and sustainable research teams as well as cooperation arrangements between schools, research institutes and laboratory facilities.
21. Make it easier to use allocated research funds from non-state sources within set rules but exploiting them as much as possible.
22. Expand research support services to help staff with proposals, fund allocations, etc.
23. Make every effort to implement the ambitious research plans by, e.g. attracting top research teams and individuals.
24. Implement plans to set up post-doc and research assistant positions with career plans for NU graduates and create opportunities for Kazakhstani and international PhD candidates and post-docs to work in an international research environment at NU.
25. Create milestones and indicators for the ambitious research strategy implementation covering individual researchers, research groups and the university.
26. Implement the ALLEA Revised Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

**Service to society**

27. Continue to make activities in society visible in order to ensure ongoing good will.

**Internationalisation**

28. Maintain and develop mutually beneficial international contacts and continue to explore mobility opportunities for young staff and students.
29. Strive to increase attracting international students through the planned summer school scheme and other initiatives, as well as increase student mobility.