

European Humanities University

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the European Humanities University (EHU), Vilnius. The evaluation took place between October and December 2013.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

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

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

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a “fitness for (and of) purpose” approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 Profile of the European Humanities University (EHU)

EHU's profile cannot be adequately described without reference to its history, which is without parallel in the European Higher Education Area. Founded in 1992 during the period of *perestroika* which marked the end of the Soviet regime, it was one of many initiatives aiming to effect significant and rapid cultural change in Belarus. EHU pursued a threefold objective: to re-invigorate the liberal intellectual traditions which had been suppressed for several decades; to develop a pedagogy favouring critical thought and independent study; and to prepare an academic and professional élite capable of regenerating Belarusian institutions and bringing the country back into the international community.

This ambitious programme was, however, frustrated by pressure from the Lukashenko government, to the point at which – in 2004 – all EHU operations in Minsk were closed down, with the exception of the Theology Faculty, which remained open under the leadership of the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church.

By 2005, EHU had relocated to Vilnius, in Lithuania, electing to continue its Belarusian mission from across the border. Since 2006, it has been recognised by the Lithuanian Government as a private university. This means that it enjoys academic, administrative, economic and financial autonomy, as defined in Article 7 of the 2009 Lithuanian Law on Higher Education and Research (Law XI-242, subsequently amended in 2012 to become Law XI-1987). It also means that it is subject to Lithuanian law and must follow institutional accreditation procedure, which functions on a five-year cycle. The next renewal is due in 2014.

EHU regards itself as a “university-in-exile”.¹ This designation, however, covers a complex reality. While its legal base is in Vilnius, much of its operations are conducted on a cross-border basis. That is to say, the majority of its academic staff commute daily or weekly from Belarus (Minsk is a three-hour train journey away), while two thirds of the student body, resident in Belarus, study on a distance learning basis. These students are classified, from the Vilnius point of view, as “low residence” and attend only occasionally, for weekend seminars; the remainder – the “high residence” students, of whom the vast majority are also Belarusian – study in full-time mode. Neither the commuting staff nor the low-residence students in transit to Vilnius can rely on unimpeded border crossings. These logistical difficulties frequently impact on academic activities, disrupting teaching and rendering meetings inoperative.

EHU’s commitment to the humanities has historically given priority to philosophy. In one sense this remains the case. EHU’s only doctoral programme is a PhD in philosophy; its content is nevertheless inter-disciplinary, with a focus on the impact of new technologies and globalisation on ethics, identity and social practices. At Master and Bachelor levels, meanwhile, the emphasis has shifted to business administration, cultural and media studies, history, law, political and social science, and psychology.

Of these disciplines, the largest in terms of student numbers is media studies, with 745 (49%) of the total of 1522 students in the 2012-2013 session. This has consistently been the case over the last four academic years. During the period 2009-10/2012-13, however, overall numbers have fallen from 1965 to 1448, a drop in excess of 26%. The situation at the School of Social and Political Science has become particularly parlous. Although EHU cannot legally recruit in Belarus, it has built a strong social media presence, as well as a reputation for freedom from the self-censorship perceived to prevail in Belarusian higher education institutions. The decline in numbers is therefore doubly disappointing – in terms of mission and fee income. Moreover, the university is aware that both factors may influence the

¹ See <http://www.ehu.lt/en/about> (accessed December 26 2013)

positions taken by its major donors and sponsors (the European Commission, the Nordic and Lithuanian Governments, and US human rights foundations). This is a particular anxiety at a time when demographic decline limits the opportunities to recruit Lithuanian students and when costs are rising across the board.

The IEP evaluation took place at a moment at which the profile of EHU had been recognised by all parties as problematic and in transition. The team heard that the university was entering its third phase: the years in Minsk had been followed by what was regarded at the time as a temporary relocation to Vilnius; now it was apparent that Vilnius would become EHU's long-term home. This realisation, widely shared, prompted many questions. How would this evolution affect the mission and its delivery? How might it be managed to the satisfaction of the full range of stakeholders, external and internal? What did it mean in terms of financial sustainability? Would EHU leave the premises rented from Mykolas Romeris University and move to a refurbished building in the historic centre of Vilnius? These questions – and many more – constituted the backdrop to the evaluation.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation was undertaken by a group of ten senior administrators and academics chaired by Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs Aliaksandr Kalbaska; the Specialist for Quality Control, Laura Varnauskaite, acted as secretary. The group had been selected on the basis of its professional responsibilities. The drafting process involved the consultation of heads of department, divisions and units. Students were not directly involved, either in the drafting or in the subsequent consultation, except insofar as they have representation on the Senate. This was regrettable. Both Senate and the Governing Body considered the report, with no comment. Publication on the intranet likewise elicited no reaction.

The self-evaluation report aimed to achieve a number of objectives: in the first instance, to satisfy the requirements of the Institutional Evaluation Programme; secondly, to pave the way for the re-accreditation of EHU by the SKVC (the Lithuanian national agency) in 2014; and finally, to add momentum to the strategic planning process for the seven-year period 2012-2019. In the view of the team, its clear statement of the EHU mission was not matched by clarity of strategic perspectives or decision-making processes.

Moreover, – perhaps inevitably, given the uncertainty and urgency indicated above – the self-evaluation was to some extent overtaken by events. The IEP team learnt, arriving for its second visit, that the posts of Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies (posts held by members of the self-evaluation group) had been discontinued and that the post of provost had been created and was due to be taken up in March 2014.

This appeared to mean that the short-term perspectives had changed significantly in the ten weeks since the team's first visit; the medium-term prospects, meanwhile, were clouded by the drop in student numbers and by the absence of a precise development plan, on the basis of which the international funders could confidently re-commit. In this context, the seven-year planning frame gave a misplaced sense of security, particularly in view of the fact that

the rector's current mandate is due to end in 2016. This is not to say that EHU is unaware of the challenges facing it. On the contrary, the self-evaluation report was frank in its identification of weaknesses. Its listing of strengths, by contrast, was aspirational rather than factual, doubtless due to the feeling, widely shared, of having arrived at a crossroads.

The self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in July 2013. The two visits of the evaluation team to Vilnius took place from 2 to 4 October and from 15 to 18 December, respectively. Between the visits EHU provided additional documentation – notably, the strategic plan, updated statistics and flowcharts, and material regarding Lithuanian legislation.

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

- Professor Dieter Timmermann, former Rector of University of Bielefeld, Germany, team chair
- Professor Mar Campins Eritja, former Vice-Rector, University of Barcelona, Spain
- Ms Delia Gologan, student, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania
- Dr Howard Davies, Senior Adviser, EUA, Brussels, team coordinator

The team thanks Rector Anatoli Mikhailov for his generous hospitality and his readiness to share his rich experience of EHU's history, as well as his appreciation of its future prospects. It is indebted to all those that it met for their openness to question and dialogue. Finally, it records its special gratitude to Laura Varnauskaite, who ensured that the supplementary documentation was promptly delivered and who coordinated the logistics of the visits with great efficiency and warmth.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

As indicated already, in the autumn of 2013 EHU faced a range of possible futures. Would it become a university in permanent exile, exclusively and hazardously targeting a Belarusian catchment? Would it shift its focus entirely to a Lithuanian intake? Would it extend the policy, now embarked upon, of offering joint degrees with Lithuanian partner institutions? Would it widen its horizons to include Ukraine, Moldova and other countries caught between competing spheres of geo-political interest, European and Russian? Would it build a profile that was avowedly international?

Unsurprisingly, given the composition of staff and student bodies, the team found broad agreement that the Belarusian mission should not be abandoned. This view was shared by those external stakeholders whose organisations (some, like EHU, operating across the border into Belarus from a position of temporary or permanent exile) regarded EHU's activities as a crucial factor in the struggle to restore Belarus to democracy. The team heard no strong advocacy of the "opposite" view, that is to say, recommending decisive and exclusive "Lithuanianisation". There were, however, intermediate positions which held that the Belarusian mission had to mutate into a broader-based programme, if it was to diversify and strengthen revenue streams and thus ensure sustainability.

Given the urgency and the range of EHU's strategic options, it is crucial that it possess the capacity to build consensus on the basis of full and reliable information. The team's concern was therefore to assess the robustness and representative extent of the university's decision-making processes. It found a plurality of bodies enjoying a status specified by Statute: the General Assembly of Part-Owners, the Governing Board, the rector and the Senate. However, the formal relationship of the Senate to the others is not wholly clear. Statute 9.1, which declares the Senate to be the "supreme body of academic self-governance", understates the complexity of its interaction with the rectorate in particular, as well as those respects in which its role is advisory. The team learnt of the existence of an Executive Council operating at approximately the same level in the managerial and policymaking hierarchy, the composition and remit of which are not specified in the Statutes. Similarly absent from the Statutes is the position of provost, a post variously described to the team as chief executive officer (CEO) and as "first vice-rector, *primus inter pares*".

The team formed the view that the distribution of competences in the decision-making processes is unclear and uncertain. In practice, it found that the style of institutional management is excessively top-down and that, by common consent, the quality of internal communication is poor. This is not the best position from which to address the strategic challenges facing EHU. The team believes it important to regularise the initiatives taken in urgent response to the university's predicament. This means putting in place instruments and processes of governance which all sections of the academic, administrative and managerial communities can support. In particular, it will mean addressing the problems of internal communication in the interests of consensus-building; it is crucial that all constituencies can access information and express opinion in a timely and transparent manner. Finally, it will

involve clarifying the extent to which the Senate is able to amend its own formal composition; an issue which the team understands is unresolved.

As indicated earlier, the team found widespread support for the core Belarusian mission of EHU. This being so, it recommends that the mission be re-affirmed and translated into a strategic plan with prioritisations, realistic timeframes, and procedures for reviewing its implementation. This suggests open debate, in the immediate, of how the mission might be consolidated and re-contextualised on a sustainable basis. Subsequently, delivery of the strategic plan should be energetic and backed by consensus.

In the team's view, one of the desirable outcomes of this process is a viable language policy – with indications of how it may be progressively implemented. Although the Statutes are drafted in English and in Lithuanian, they nevertheless (Statute 1.2) state that EHU has legal names also in Belarusian and Russian. The EHU website is likewise quadrilingual. On the other hand, the job description for the post of "Secretariate Assistant"², to cite a current example, is available only in Russian – Russian being, with English and Lithuanian, one of the three official recruitment languages. Similarly, the dominant language of delivery in the Department of Media Studies is also Russian. The team considers that the official, but seemingly occasional, use of four languages risks creating confusion. While different languages will be used for different purposes, it is essential that the contractual agreements binding EHU to its staff and students specify clearly in which domains particular languages have legal or official status. The language policy should be explicit and accessible by all parties, internal and external.

The team realises that this is a complex issue which sits at the heart of institutional strategy. It raises the questions of human resource policy, target countries for recruitment, languages of course delivery, and ease of access to research funding. In the opinion of the team, these matters should be clarified as soon as possible.

Finally, the team notes that the Governing Board represents, broadly speaking, the constituencies that assure EHU's standing in the wider Europe and in the USA. Currently, no seats are made available to the "local" external stakeholders mentioned at the beginning of this section – those whose commitments would offer strong support (political and moral, rather than financial) to the Belarusian mission of the university. The team recommends that this omission, somewhat unusual in the context of mainstream European higher education, be reconsidered.

The team recommends that EHU:

- ▶ determine the role of bodies not defined in the Statutes (executive council, provost) and amend the Statutes accordingly
- ▶ ensure that all internal constituencies have access to reliable information and are able to participate in the decision-making process

²<http://www.ehu.lt/en/about/jobs>, accessed 31 December 2013

- ▶ incorporate ad hoc planning committees into formal process
- ▶ reaffirm the institutional mission and develop an appropriate strategy with prioritisations, realistic timeframes, monitoring and review of implementation
- ▶ formulate an institutional language policy
- ▶ review the composition of the Governing Board to ensure representation by local external stakeholders.

3. Teaching and learning

EHU's mission, as currently formulated, means that its major competitors are Belarusian. Although it recruits from the same pool of staff and students, EHU aims to provide what cannot be provided in Belarus – a capacity to think critically, as well as opportunities for intellectual discovery and physical mobility in the wider Europe. In the early years in Minsk, the mission relied on seminar-based small group study, with deliberately weak formal boundaries between teacher and taught. It fostered learning communities dedicated to thinking against the orthodoxy. Recruitment of students from Belarus had then, and still has, to deal with the fact that most applicants come through the Belarusian secondary system, which is heavily reliant on rote-learning.

EHU lecturers maintain their commitment to critical thinking and student-centred learning, but they are unfamiliar with the structural features, policies and procedures of Bologna and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The team considers that, whatever strategic direction is ultimately taken by EHU, it will be beneficial for the university to ensure that its curricula are competence-based and that learning outcomes feature in the allocation of ECTS points and in assessment methods. This is an evolutionary process in which many other European universities are currently engaged. There is no reason to suppose that EHU cannot do likewise, particularly as Lithuanian accreditation procedures favour gradual, rather than radical, curricular change.

A stronger European profile can be an asset for EHU, in terms of its attractiveness to students from all destinations and to international institutional partnerships, as well as giving it an advantage over its Belarusian competitors. By contrast, the formal position of Belarus in respect of the EHEA is best described as marginal. It acceded to the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2002 and is nominally participant in Platform 4 of the EU's Eastern Partnership, managed by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture³. It is eligible for some EU funding streams (the Belarusian State University, for example, has a Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence in European Integration Studies), but it is not a signatory country of the Bologna Process.

The team met departmental heads, staff and students of all four schools. It found the high-residence students to be impressively motivated. In principle, they had come to EHU for independence, innovative curricula and a different perspective on Belarus, and they had found them. They nevertheless voiced their frustration, asking for greater intellectual challenge and – to help them rise to the challenge – reliable course schedules, timetables and distribution of workload. They also wished for more technical assistance in the MediaHub, more international teachers, and more contact hours at Master level.

³See http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/international/doc/wp12_en.pdf

Academic staff, too, were both committed and frustrated, largely because their availability was compromised by the unpredictability of border controls, administrative burdens and less than optimal working conditions.

It was evident from discussions with the rectorate and senior management that EHU is acutely aware of these problems. It sees the remedy in reducing the number of cross-border commuting staff, currently on short-term "service" contracts, and increasing the number of academic staff on more secure "labour" contracts. The latter are five-year contracts which come with higher salaries, one-year renewable Lithuanian residence permits, relocation grants and support for family members. Academic staff receive a permanent contract if they succeed in an open competition for a five-year contract twice in succession.

The team, in discussion with the teaching staff, found that this significant initiative, which represented a considerable financial investment, has nevertheless failed to raise morale. There is uncertainty about the numbers of "labour" contracts to be involved beyond the first phase, as well as anxiety regarding how many will actually go to Belarusian teachers. Set against the background of the drop in student numbers and the likelihood that this will impact on staffing levels, this anxiety will deepen if clear policy decisions are not openly taken and disseminated.

The team appreciates that this is a difficult situation for all parties. However, insofar as Belarusian staff are encouraged to promote student recruitment in Belarus by word of mouth, it is important that they feel as secure as possible. It therefore recommends that EHU make every effort to ensure that its human resource initiatives are intelligible, equitable and fair. In addition, and in order to strengthen the sense of academic identity, serious thought should be given to staff development programmes in curriculum development, language competence, and (see below) in quality assurance.

The team recommends that EHU:

- ▶ seek an urgent remedy to problems with staff timetabling, in order to ensure reliable course planning and regularly distributed student workload
- ▶ ensure that human resource initiatives are intelligible, equitable and fair, and accompanied by staff development programmes
- ▶ ensure that future curriculum development is fully aligned with European standards.

4. Research

The team heard from various sources that the link between curriculum development and research is not regarded as strong. It appreciates that EHU is aware of this deficiency and that it is investing energy and resources into building research capacity. The team fully endorses the view that research is an essential feature of a university profile.

It notes the existence of three priority areas, specified in the self-evaluation report: liberal education in the contemporary world; socio-cultural transformations in Eastern Europe and problems of European integration; the ideological grounds of European culture and the logic of globalisation.

These are neither exclusively Belarusian nor mono-disciplinary. Their scope suggests that they have the potential to act as a platform for innovative in-house, online and joint curriculum development at all three Bologna levels. Indeed, the team learnt that inter-university doctoral programmes are in preparation and that work with Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas on a new joint Bachelor programme in world economics is well-advanced. These are encouraging initiatives. The team, however, has reservations regarding the number of research centres: nine is a high number for a small institution with relatively few active researchers. Here the risk is one of dispersal of energies, when what is required is critical mass attaching to each of the three priority areas.

Such a rationalisation, however, is only a first step in the construction of an active research culture. The team fully realises the magnitude of the task. In addition to structures which strengthen the focus of the research effort, academic staff require secure working conditions, adequate resources for conference attendance and for doctoral supervision, competence in the major international research languages, and a supportive infrastructure. In capacity building, moreover, the support of early-stage researchers needs particular attention.

It is clear to the team that EHU, with its allegiance to Humboldtian traditions, requires a level of research productivity which is intellectually and financially sustainable. The two aspects are not independent of one another. EHU receives some moral and technical support from the Lithuanian agency MOSTA, but no funding. While some funds exist in the international human rights foundations, the major potential provider is undoubtedly the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, now coming on stream for the period 2014-2020.

Participation in Horizon 2020, however, is broadly conditional on three factors: excellence of research profile; adequate project management capacity; eligibility. Bidding to EU research funds is best done initially in the context of a collaborative venture coordinated by an experienced university; the task is formidable without the assistance of staff with detailed knowledge of the programme and well-developed skills in securing partners, drafting bids, project monitoring, financial reporting, and archiving.

To build such a group of staff in a small institution is a challenging prospect. The team well understands, however, that this is only one aspect of the human resource situation. It is

reassured to learn that plans to give a more solid structure to the academic staffing are now underway. In conjunction with the initiative to raise the proportion of “labour” contract posts, which may lead ultimately to EU citizenship and a higher level of eligibility for Horizon 2020, EHU will define qualifications criteria for all academic grades. It will also introduce norms for personal timetables for academic staff, dividing individuals’ time between research, curriculum development, and teaching, according to grade and in line with Lithuanian legislation.

In the light of these considerations, the team recommends that EHU:

- ▶ re-structure the nine research centres in line with the three research priorities, in order to maximise the potential for inter-disciplinary research and new doctoral programmes
- ▶ target support and introduce incentives for young researchers and for PhD supervisors
- ▶ establish a research infrastructure capable of applying to Horizon 2020.

5. Service to society

To what extent does EHU effectively serve Belarusian society? The circumstances in which the university finds itself make this a difficult question to answer. EHU is in no position to effect direct political change within Belarus; any influence which it might bring to bear on Belarusian institutions and on attitudes in civil society is necessarily gradual, long-term, dependent on other processes of change, and objectively immeasurable. Its outreach work in Vilnius is much more visible, but consists principally in conferences, seminars and workshops organised in support of the research agenda. The team therefore looked for evidence in a number of factors which might indicate positive outcomes: recruitment levels; employment rates; testimony of sympathetic external agencies; support from donors with a clear political agenda.

Recruitment levels, it has been noted already, are down over the past four years – to the point at which a number of programmes are recording zero intakes. The team was uncertain to what extent the tuition fee policy is effective in widening participation to students from poorer families. The policy explicitly rewards academic merit, but the high-residence students with whom the team discussed the matter suggested that the fee structure is flawed, insofar as it rewards high grades attained at end-of-secondary level, while taking no account of the fact that different disciplines have different grading systems; certain disciplines are favoured as a result.

The decline in student numbers means that in the medium term the output of graduates will also fall sharply. Unfortunately, there is no longitudinal data on graduate employment rates. The team understands that 80% of law graduates remain in or return to Belarus to work in the private sector (Bachelors) or in private and public sectors (Masters). EHU has recently conducted a survey of alumni⁴ which achieved a response rate of 47% (289) of all those with whom ongoing contact exists. More than 90% of these are in employment in Belarus, half in the private sector (including media and non-profit organisations), some self-employed or running their own companies, and 11% with posts in Belarusian state institutions. The team trusts that this first survey marks the beginning of systematic graduate tracking; experience in other European institutions shows that it can be a powerful tool for marketing and recruitment, as well as a quality assurance instrument.

EHU offers relatively few internships. The team recognises that they are problematic to organise on a cross-border basis and that for Belarusian students there is a major language problem where Lithuanian employers are concerned. It nevertheless recommends that efforts be made to raise the level of provision, both to consolidate competence-based curricula and to boost employability. In its meeting with Vilnius-based external stakeholders, it heard that the performance of EHU interns was good.

⁴See a summary at <http://www.ehu.lt/en/news/show/majority-of-ehu-alumni-have-jobs-and-reside-in-belarus> accessed 1 January 2014. The text of the report is not available for download.

In the same meeting, which gathered together for the first time some of the expatriate human rights organisations, as well as representatives of the two largest Lithuanian universities in Vilnius, the team was able to gain a sense of how EHU's service to Belarusian society is viewed. On the whole, opinion is nuanced. On the one hand, there is strong support for the Belarusian mission, provided that it can operate from a base which is stronger in terms of student numbers and of academic quality. One strand of this view holds that Belarusian higher education institutions are not as devoid of critical thinking or as unproductive in terms of sociological and cultural research and teaching as EHU's public pronouncements suggest. This view identifies Belarusian universities as direct competitors, rather than institutions which can be discounted, and thus puts EHU's academic quality at a premium.

At the same time, the team heard expressions of doubt that the mission can be delivered, given the low level of research and the risk that the Belarusian focus will be weakened by the need to appeal to as wide a range of funding bodies as possible. Finally, the external stakeholders reported poor quality of communication with EHU and a lack of representation. The team believes that they have a valuable contribution to make and recommends that ways be sought of involving them – not only in governance, as indicated earlier – but also in curriculum development.

Service to society is construed by mainstream European universities as a mode of accountability. Typically, they see no contradiction between contribution to the regional economy and revenue generation. The team heard this discourse only very infrequently in its two visits to EHU – but enough to suggest that there exist viable opportunities for consultancy that are not yet taken up (notably in law, media and tourism), as well as potential for extending the range of academic provision, particularly in distance and blended learning, into social groups beyond the post-secondary full-time student.

The team therefore recommends that EHU:

- ▶ increase the number of internship opportunities
- ▶ involve external stakeholders in curriculum development
- ▶ develop lifelong learning programmes for the benefit of mature and other non-standard students
- ▶ explore the potential for delivering consultancy in law, media and tourism.

6. Quality culture

The team learnt that in 2009 the Lithuanian accrediting body had noted the existence of an action plan for the creation of an integrated internal quality assurance system. It was therefore interested to discover what stage of implementation had been reached. It is clear that a great deal of preliminary work has been undertaken: the post of quality assurance specialist, reporting to a vice-rector, has been created; a Quality Council was set up, but operated only for a brief period in 2011, before responsibility reverted to the team of specialist and vice-rector; a Quality Manual has been produced, which the Senate adopted in October 2013. The Manual maps in detail the structures and activities of EHU, although it leaves, as yet to be decided, the questions of how internal audit and staff development procedures will actually operate. Finally, a range of key performance indicators⁵ were approved in the spring of 2013 and are in the process of implementation.

To the team, it appears that the creation of a quality assurance culture remains very much a work in progress. The challenge it poses to EHU is complex and urgent. How to accelerate its development, in the light of the forthcoming re-accreditation by SKVC? How to align it with mainstream European quality assurance practice, as set down in the so-called ESG⁶? How to ensure that it is in place and capable of supporting a plan for growth in whatever strategic direction EHU chooses to take? How to fund the staff and student training in quality assurance that will be a crucial element in institutional capacity building? How to identify good practice already to be found in schools and departments and to generalise it throughout the university? How to make its effects more visible and tangible in the classrooms, so that at least some of the factors causing student drop-out can be identified and eliminated?

These are daunting tasks for a small office operating in a fragile institution at a time of rapid and uncertain transition. In the view of the team, they require the full backing of senior management, expressed in the allocation of additional human resources, in the professional development of the resources already in place, and in the extension of the office's executive power. In the current circumstances, the agenda is clear, but the means of delivering it are too slender.

In the interests of achieving visible short-term outcomes acceptable to students in particular, the team recommends the appointment of an independent Ombudsman. Such posts are becoming more widespread in the EHEA. Ombudsmen are empowered to receive and investigate complaints, to refer onwards, if necessary, and to intercede. The annual reports which they submit to senates and governing boards (detailing the volume of consultations, the topics covered, the number of problems solved, the time needed to resolve them, etc.) are very useful information and management tools. The team heard from students that the deans of the undergraduate and graduate schools (posts now discontinued, as noted earlier)

⁵See <http://www.ehu.lt/en/about/quality/key-performance-indicators> accessed December 31 2013

⁶Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, available at <http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/>

performed, if not exactly this function, at least something with a similar concern for student welfare.

The team therefore recommends that EHU:

- ▶ commit to support for a dedicated Quality Assurance office and to full developmental support for the Quality Assurance officer
- ▶ assure quality enhancement by means of effective staff development programmes in learning and teaching, curriculum development and research
- ▶ align quality management procedures with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG); provide training in quality assurance for staff and students; appoint an independent Ombudsman as trouble-shooter.

7. Internationalisation

The international dimension is already inscribed in EHU's profile, by virtue of its circumstances. However, this does not mean that its expression, in terms of strategic approaches and operating lines, are clear. The team's principal observation runs parallel to that made in connection with quality assurance, namely, that the available capacity in human and financial resources is insufficient.

Generally speaking, international relations offices in European universities have strong involvement in EU and other mobility programmes, mainly for students, but often for early-stage researchers and academic staff. In many countries, they are responsible for all recruitment beyond the domestic. They provide liaison in the development of joint degrees, participate in consortial work and conferences, gathering intelligence on potential collaborative links and on the activities of competing institutions. Finally, they have a powerful input into institutional policymaking in a number of areas: research, human resources, foreign language provision, student support services, and so on.

The situation in EHU is a long way from this model. As has been observed already, a number of strategic options exist. Until they are settled, it is uncertain which countries and regions beyond Belarus (Baltic, Russophone, Scandinavian) are to be prioritised. Meanwhile, the team believes that EHU should give serious consideration to expanding the capacity of what is currently a one-person office. This is necessary, if EHU wishes to be in a state of readiness to take advantage of ERASMUS+ and other funded programmes, as well as to benefit from the intended appointment of international researchers and the planned shift from a service-contract to labour-contract framework for the employment of Belarusian staff.

The need for a clear language policy has already been mentioned (see above, page 7). Once again, EHU's position is exceptional, given the range of languages taught and languages used in course delivery. For Belarusian Bachelor students in law and media, for example, three languages are compulsory – Lithuanian, English and French, one of which might be *ab initio* – and this requires upwards of eight hours contact per week, in groups of 15-20. The language acquisition programme is demanding, particularly as it aims to improve skills in reading, writing, speaking and oral comprehension. Internationalisation to a wider range of countries will increase the burden placed on the language centre, which currently has no language laboratories, relying on face-to-face teaching and Moodle.

The team recommends that EHU:

- ▶ develop an international strategy and operating plan, specifying target regions for recruitment, collaborative links and joint research projects
- ▶ explore the potential for joint and double degrees and for internationalisation at home

- ▶ strengthen international office staffing and allocate a budget with which it can fulfil its objectives
- ▶ ensure the international office's effective liaison with units responsible for recruitment, research and language provision.

8. Conclusion

IEP, as noted in the introduction to this report, has a European and international perspective. However, it is not for the team to recommend which of EHU's strategic options should be taken up. Continuity of mission is bound to be a major consideration, but it is harder for EHU than for other institutions to consolidate its traditions. Its history has been fractured, yet somehow this fracture must inform its choice of future.

In the course of its frank and open discussions, the team was struck by the extent to which the core Belarusian mission commands strong support. At the same time, and paradoxically, many EHU colleagues doubt that this is the case. All believe, but many doubt the belief of others. It was clear to the team that different constituencies feel isolated and that the platform for moving forward is thereby weakened. The team hopes that its report will assist in the process of integrating and harnessing the consensus.

The team's concern has been to make recommendations which can help to build institutional capacity at this important juncture. Based on snapshot observations, on detailed reading of EHU documentation and on many focused conversations, its recommendations tend to a particular conclusion. This is that EHU has become smaller, but that it has not used this contraction to become more integrated. In its efforts to establish a momentum of growth in a clear strategic direction, it must therefore – at least in the short term – find synergies between its different policy lines which allow it to economise and focus its administrative resources. This will give it the platform necessary for gaining critical mass and driving up the quality of its academic provision.

Summary of recommendations

The team recommends that EHU:

- ▶ determine the role of bodies not defined in the Statutes (executive council, provost) and amend the Statutes accordingly
- ▶ ensure that all internal constituencies have access to reliable information and are able to participate in the decision-making process
- ▶ incorporate ad hoc planning committees into formal process
- ▶ reaffirm the institutional mission and develop an appropriate strategy with prioritisations, realistic timeframes, monitoring and review of implementation
- ▶ formulate an institutional language policy
- ▶ review the composition of the Governing Board to ensure representation by local external stakeholders

- ▶ seek an urgent remedy to problems with staff timetabling, in order to ensure reliable course planning and regularly distributed student workload
- ▶ ensure that human resource initiatives are intelligible, equitable and fair, and accompanied by staff development programmes
- ▶ ensure that future curriculum development is fully aligned with European standards
- ▶ re-structure the nine research centres in line with the three research priorities, in order to maximise the potential for inter-disciplinary research and new doctoral programmes
- ▶ target support and introduce incentives for young researchers and for PhD supervisors
- ▶ establish a research infrastructure capable of applying to Horizon 2020
- ▶ increase the number of internship opportunities
- ▶ involve external stakeholders in curriculum development
- ▶ develop lifelong learning programmes for the benefit of mature and other non-standard students
- ▶ explore the potential for delivering consultancy in law, media and tourism
- ▶ commit to support for a dedicated Quality Assurance office and to full developmental support for the Quality Assurance officer
- ▶ assure quality enhancement by means of effective staff development programmes in learning and teaching, curriculum development and research
- ▶ align quality management procedures with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG); provide training in quality assurance for staff and students; appoint an independent Ombudsman as trouble-shooter
- ▶ develop an international strategy and operating plan, specifying target regions for recruitment, collaborative links and joint research projects
- ▶ explore the potential for joint and double degrees and for internationalisation at home
- ▶ strengthen international office staffing and allocate a budget with which it can fulfil its objectives
- ▶ ensure the international office's effective liaison with units responsible for recruitment, research and language provision.