

**ST PAUL THE APOSTLE**  
**UNIVERSITY OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, OHRID**

***EVALUATION REPORT***

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## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of St Paul The Apostle University of Information Science and Technology, Ohrid. The evaluation took place in the framework of the project “Skills Development and Innovation Support Project” (SDISP), implemented by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia<sup>1</sup> through the Ministry of Education and Science. The overall objective of the project is to improve transparency of resource allocation and promote accountability in higher education, enhance the relevance of secondary technical vocational education and support innovation capacity in the country.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of the project, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

### 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.

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is used for the purposes of this project only and does not represent any formal position of EUA or IEP regarding the name of the country.

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 St Paul The Apostle University of Information Science and Technology, Ohrid’s profile**

The University was founded by the government of the Republic of Macedonia in 2009 and has so far recruited seven cohorts of students. The University is a non-profit, publicly funded university which enjoys central government support to enable the recruitment of foreign academic staff and students. Its programmes are nationally accredited.

The University focuses solely on Information Science and Technology, areas identified by the central government as key to attracting foreign investment and developing high value employment opportunities in the country. In further support of those ends teaching delivery is in the English language. The University comprises five small faculties: Computer Science and Engineering; Communication Networks and Security; Applied Information Technology, Machine Intelligence and Robotics; Information Systems, Visualisation, Digital Multimedia and Animation Technique; and Information and Communication Science.

Its location in the relatively small city of Ohrid (population of about 40,000) was intended by central government to diversify and, partly in response to local government lobbying, to decentralise the provision of higher education in the Republic of Macedonia rather than because of existing employment opportunities and disciplinary expertise in that region, which is otherwise mainly dependent on agriculture and tourism.

To the best of the evaluation team’s understanding (See Section 1.3 The evaluation process below) the University has just over 400 undergraduate students enrolled and has recruited fewer than 10 postgraduate students a year over the past five years, usually a small minority of students continuing on from undergraduate study at the University. Currently only two of the five accredited postgraduate programmes are admitting students.

Only a small number of academic staff are Macedonian and are retained on standard employment contracts. However, they are complemented by a further number of full-time and part-time foreign staff retained on annually renewable contracts for intellectual services (See Section 2 Governance and institutional decision-making below). The team found it difficult to establish the exact number of local and foreign academic staff employed by the University due to conflicting figures given by different sources.

The University supplied spreadsheet information about the University's finances but without analysis or proportions. The evaluation team's reading was that the University's annual combined capital and revenue budget was somewhere below 1.7 million Euros, of which around 25% was expended on foreign staff retained on annually renewable contracts for intellectual services and 18% on other staff salaries.

The University's self-evaluation report offered statements of its vision, mission and strategic goals. However, the evaluation team was unclear whether these had been written for the report or came from formal approved University documents. University staff advised that strategic direction usually flowed from the platform put forward by aspirant candidates for the four-year rectorship. The current Rector's Platform was supplied to the evaluation team after the first visit and set out six primary objectives:

- To strengthen the research potential, output and visibility;
- To nurture excellence in teaching and offer competitive education;
- To advance international cooperation and mobility;
- To develop management and financial sustainability frameworks;
- To improve the University's infrastructure and student life;
- To demonstrate social responsibility and further serve the public interest.

The University reported that due to its size and significant proportion of non-Macedonian academic staff, it had significant difficulty in complying with national requirements in relation to structures for, and operation of, governance and management of higher education institutions. The University also perceived itself to be similarly constrained by central government funding and quality assurance arrangements in relation to its further development. The Vice-Rector, standing in for the Rector, advised the evaluation team that the University "can decide how to get there but not where to go."

### **1.3 The evaluation process**

The University advised that the self-evaluation process was undertaken by a Senate-constituted Self-Evaluation Committee of six academic staff from across all its faculties and three students. The University described the process of self-evaluation as being realised through weekly meetings of the Committee. The Committee approved a questionnaire for the self-evaluation, in which other members of the academic staff participated, in order "to identify their perceptions regarding the main issues in the process of evaluation". The questionnaire was sent to all members of the Senate and University academic staff, as were later the results and the preliminary version of the self-evaluation for further feedback.

In practice, the self-evaluation report appeared to be an analysis of a student satisfaction survey that was conducted at the University as part of the national accreditation requirements, and therefore lacked some basic information as well as any analytical self-reflection.

The two visits of the evaluation team to the university took place from 8 to 10 May 2017 and from 2 to 5 October 2017 respectively. Some additional documentation was supplied by the university between the first and second visits.

Unfortunately the quality of information provided by the University and the arrangements made for the site visits did not meeting the expectations of the team. For example, there was limited response to requests for additional information and attendance at meetings during the first visit appeared not have been arranged in advance. Issues such as these hindered the effectiveness of the evaluation. Of particular concern, the Rector of the University was not present during either visit and therefore the team was unable to meet with him. The Vice-Rector deputised for the Rector throughout both visits.

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

- Sokratis Katsikas, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway (and former Rector of the University of the Aegean, Greece), team chair
- Ingegerd Palmér, former Rector of the University of Luleå, University of Technology, Sweden
- Hermann Blum, student, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zürich, Switzerland
- Gregory Clark, former Associate Secretary, University of Salford, United Kingdom, team coordinator

The team thanks the staff and students of the University for their engagement with the process at meetings during the team's visits; thanks the Vice-Rector, Professor Ivan Bimbilovski, for deputising on both visits for the Rector; and thanks the University's administrative staff for their responses to the team's information requests.

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

The Vice-Rector advised the team that the University's origins, as a recently established university enjoying particular central government support to enable the recruitment of foreign academic staff and students, also inadvertently presented it with its most significant challenge in terms of governance and management. The unique circumstances and nature of the institution were not reflected in the national requirements placed upon it to comply with the standard arrangements for the governance and management of public universities in the Republic of Macedonia.

The University advised that it was obliged to seek to recruit any foreign academic staff with academic qualifications obtained from top 500 universities in the global rankings. It would not be competitive to pay the same salaries as Macedonian academic staff to its complement of foreign academic staff. The University struggled therefore to comply with the national requirement that each Faculty should comprise at least 50% full-time staff, as many foreign academic staff, who were retained on annually renewable contracts for intellectual services, also worked at other institutions and were only part-time appointments at the University. Contravening these requirements came with the risk of fines against the University budget. The University had so far been unsuccessful in lobbying central government to amend the law so as to take into account the University's unique circumstances and nature. The recruitment of foreign academic staff (usually via free to use websites) at these higher salary rates was therefore done using time-limited contracts drawing on income earned through projects and outside the normal contractual arrangements which required Ministry of Finance approval and consent to hire. However, the University was not permitted to make substantive standard appointments from its income earned through projects. Furthermore, senior positions and committee memberships are reserved by law for Macedonian nationals. Therefore, the University had to recruit to such positions and memberships from a small pool of Macedonian staff or resort to temporary expedients such as interim appointments.

Students and Macedonian staff reported a high turnover year to year of foreign staff. The team was told that in one particular year the situation was worsened by delays of over six months at central government level in processing salary payments to foreign staff. Senior staff at the University noted that the number and standard of applicants was decreasing, and that the Rector tended to reserve individual selection and contract renewal decisions to himself. The evaluation team was unable to establish definitively the headcount and full-time equivalent numbers of Macedonian and foreign academic staff but was advised that the University's Staff: Student Ratio was 1:25.

The team learnt that recently the position had become more difficult for the University in that it was no longer attracting many foreign staff applicants from top 500 universities in the global rankings and that the salaries which the University could offer in compliance with central government requirements to Macedonian academic staff were not as attractive as those which qualified IT lecturers might obtain in other employment. The University also

applied its own quality criteria to the recruitment of academic staff from amongst its doctoral assistants, setting work experience requirements which, in the view of staff and the team, were arguably unrealistically high and inhibited the potential appointment of good Macedonian academic staff.

The University's ability to recruit administrative staff was similarly constrained and currently no Secretary General was in post as the University did not have Ministry of Finance approval and consent to hire. The team was advised that certain administrative staff were only on temporary contracts. The University moved staff around to cover vacancies, but the point had been reached where essential tasks were no longer discharged because the remaining staff did not have the capacity to do all that was required of them (for example, the finalisation of action plans in response to non-compliance identified by recent audits carried out by the national authorities, and the completion of national returns on Human Resources).

There was consensus amongst academic and administrative staff that the administrative staffing level was insufficient for the overall workload. The team shared that view. The overall impact was twofold. Firstly, there was a heavy reliance upon a small number of key Macedonian academic and administrative staff who had a significant workload. The Vice-Rector himself, despite a range of other duties, also had to teach nine hours a week. Secondly, the heavy operational demands on a small complement of administrative staff reinforced the role of those staff as merely implementers of decisions taken rather than informed advisers in the decision-making process.

The University did attempt to comply with the national requirements for governance and management of higher education institutions. Although the University had been set up from its establishment to operate without a Board of Trustees, it was supposed to have an Advisory Board through which to engage with regional stakeholders. However, central government appointments to the Advisory Board had not been made and employers were reluctant to serve unless their time was remunerated. There was therefore no oversight of the executive management of the University other than the by the state through the Ministries of Education and Science and of Finance and occasional audit visits.

The Senate was the University's highest authority and was assisted by a number of standing committees or commissions including those for Education and for Research. The Senate approved detailed University Regulations under which the institution operated. The team was told that Senate membership should comprise the Rector as Chair and eleven other members excluding Deans but including one student representative. However, because of a lack of Macedonian academic staff able to serve, there were currently only three members alongside the Rector. There was no student member of the Senate and the team was offered no evidence of any formal student participation in deliberation and decision-making. The Vice-Rector's view was that the inactivity of the Student Organisation meant that it was difficult to recruit to student memberships of University bodies. The students whom the team met however did not feel actively encouraged to participate and the team did not sense such encouragement from the University.



The Rector is appointed following a process open to internal and external candidates for up to two, four-year terms of office. The current Rector had recently been appointed for a second term of office. All staff and students whom the team met reported that the Rector was seldom present at the University campus. According to national requirements the Rector should be supported by a team of four Vice-Rectors. In practice, only one Vice-Rector was in post and he spent a significant proportion of time deputising for the frequently absent Rector. A Rector's Board of senior staff was also supposed to convene to assist the Rector in the executive management of the University.

Each Faculty theoretically had a Dean, a Vice-Dean and a Teaching Council with student representation. The Deans advised that they had overall responsibility at local level for academic quality assurance. Again, the lack of Macedonian academic staff meant that only three of the five Teaching Councils were in operation. Deans were elected by Faculty staff, but interim appointments could be made by the Rector. The three Deans whom the team met on the first visit were all interim and only one was Macedonian.

From meetings with staff and sample agenda and minutes the team drew the conclusion that the University's academic deliberative committee structure did not really operate in a meaningful way. The Rector was not on campus frequently enough for regular meetings to be held under his chairship. Meetings had insufficient participation, in part because foreign academic staff could not participate due to their contracts as non-substantive staff. Meetings were brief and there was no record of discussion of significant matters such as academic quality assurance or teaching and learning. Academic staff reported an instance of a proposed rationalisation of the programme portfolio being endorsed by a lower committee for consideration by Senate but never making the Senate agenda because the proposal was not favoured by the Rector. When staff were challenged to describe to the team how some of the issues facing the University might be resolved, they had no confidence that any ideas they generated would survive consideration by the Rector's Board and/or the Senate. In brief, the team understood that unless an idea was initiated or endorsed by the Rector, it would not go forward.

Moreover, members of the Senate and Rector's Board had no clear understanding of which matters were within the remit of the Senate as opposed to Rector's Board. The team concluded that this chiefly stemmed from the fact that most key decisions appeared to be centralised for determination remotely by the Rector. The Vice-Rector offered the view that the Rector saw this as appropriate as the legislative underpinning of the University's establishment placed defined and specific legal responsibilities upon the Rector. The team acknowledged those responsibilities but did not believe that this in itself precluded reasonable delegation to, and greater engagement of, other staff. As such, the team identified a major flaw in the University's operating model: a highly centralised, top down, mode of operation dependant on a key executive figure seldom on campus. Indeed, even though the Vice-Rector was regularly called upon to deputise for the absent Rector he did so without the institution having formally delegated powers to him to do so.

In size and operation, the University was more comparable to a single faculty in a larger university and the faculties to smaller divisions or departments in a larger university. For example, there were no delegated faculty budgets. All budgets were centralised University budgets. In that context the team wondered why the University had not considered rationalising its structure and operating as perhaps two faculties that had actual delegated responsibility and budgets. Amongst other potential advantages of economy of scale, it might assist the University to overcome the problems it faced in coping with the reservation of senior positions and committee memberships to the limited pool of Macedonian staff. Additionally, this would offer scope for the form of delegated management responsibility more usually found in European institutions. The Deans in name could become Deans in reality. However, the team was advised in response that by law a University must comprise at least five accredited units.

The University did have in place regulations and procedures regulating its operation. However, staff advised that these were in place primarily to satisfy national requirements and, although they guided University practice, the difficulties the University had in sustaining its academic deliberative committee structure and adequately staffing its operation meant that regulations and procedures were not fully observed in all circumstances.

The self-evaluation group whom the team met advised that the paramount strategic document was the Rector's Platform and that strategic direction usually flowed from the Platform. The self-evaluation group advised that the current Rector's Platform had five planks: comprising emphases on Research; on Projects; on Internationalisation/Relationship Building; on Improvement of Teaching; and on the Recruitment of more Staff and Students. In theory, ad hoc commissions were appointed by the Rector to develop more detailed plans and proposals and six such commissions (not to be confused with the standing Senate committees) were said at the first visit to be in existence. The self-evaluation group reported that there was a framework for active staff participation in designing the detail of how to operationalise the Rector's Platform; however, no evidence of this was offered to the team. Both Macedonian and foreign staff contributed, and the student voice was captured informally, for example, via post-graduation exit interviews. In the view of the self-evaluation group, the university, as a small institution, could cope by personal contact and discussion rather than over-formalised processes. Each commission, it was claimed, would produce a one-year action plan for review and approval or revision by the Senate. Complementary Faculty plans would be integrated into those at institutional level.

However, during the second visit the University admitted that the work of those commissions had not been followed through and no action plans existed, although some work had been done in compiling University action plans to address the separate matter of items of non-compliance identified by recent audits carried out by the national authorities when both financial records and action plans were scrutinised. In effect there was no systematic implementation of the Rector's Platform via implementation or action plans and consequently there was no systematic University evaluation or monitoring process of these.

The team acknowledges constraints such as the small size of the University ; a range of staffing and resource issues ; and the legislative restrictions. However, other than interim appointments and non-appointments to substantive posts and the retention of foreign staff on annually renewable contracts for intellectual services, the team was unable to discern any more creative stratagems (perhaps, for example, welcoming incoming sabbatical staff from foreign universities) where the University had attempted to work around those acknowledged constraints.

## **Recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Continue to seek discretion from the national authorities, perhaps after consideration of any innovative practice in other higher education institutions in the Republic of Macedonia, for the legitimisation of modes of governance and structure which offer the University greater discretion to operate effectively in its unique circumstances.
- Adopt a more participative approach to encouraging engagement by all staff and students, working actively with the Student Organisation to promote student engagement in the formulation of strategy and its implementation and in institutional decision-making.
- Review its internal quality criteria for the recruitment of academic staff to ensure that these do not inhibit the recruitment of good academic staff.
- Decentralise decision-making in the University through formal delegation so that the Vice-Rector and Deans are duly empowered.
- Clarify the remits of Senate and the Rector's Board and, as part of the proposed decentralisation of decision-making, ensure that they meet regularly and make meaningful contributions to the governance and management of the University.
- Ensure the monitoring and evaluation of the University's strategy through duly monitored and evaluated action plans which set out informed realistic priorities, appropriate resource allocation and locus of responsibility for delivery.

### **3. Quality Culture**

The team found that no formal quality assurance system, for teaching and learning or any other aspect of the University's activities, was applied across the University, although the team was told that some initial consideration had been given to the adoption of ISO 9001. Moreover, there was no person or body specifically identified as responsible for overseeing quality assurance within the University. The team additionally was not able to discern what use the University made of its IT infrastructure to inform its decisions on quality assurance. The team did not find evidence of the systematic use, for example, of student completion and withdrawal rates to inform programme monitoring or other decision-making.

The University paid attention to its relative position against other Macedonian institutions within the Shanghai headline rankings. However, there was no evidence offered of more realistic and detailed monitoring of aspects of the University's performance against comparative institutions in the country or region, or of comparison of academic standards with other institutions, for example, through some form of external examining arrangement.

The Vice-Rector advised the team that other than complying with national accreditation requirements, the university had no institutional approach to monitoring teaching quality. Those that the team met during the visits did not demonstrate any familiarity with the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The University did comply with national requirements for assessing the teaching and research proficiency of Macedonian academic staff and for promotion and re-appointment. The Deans advised that foreign staff who underperformed faced non-renewal of their annual contracts as a sanction. The University did not however believe it had sufficient staff resource to implement central government requirements with regard to management and peer observation of its administrative staff.

In its self-evaluation report the University stated "...students can objectively evaluate academic staff delivering teaching educational activities; students can objectively assess the level of quality and manner of performance of tutorials and the associates' approach to students and work; students can objectively evaluate the operation of students' services (students affairs), information centers, libraries, and the management's approach (Rector and Rector's board, deans and deans board)." In practice these aspects are all operationalised through the standard student satisfaction survey.

Other than student satisfaction surveys there was little active consideration of student feedback (or other stakeholder feedback such as from employers) on study programmes. Students reported that as far as they could see the University did nothing "to close the loop" and report back to students how their feedback had informed, or even changed, decision-making. The University contended that in such a small institution formal feedback procedures were not as necessary as all matters could be raised and dealt with informally.

The students whom the team met seemed broadly satisfied with their experience at the University, giving allowance for the small size of the city itself and of the University. Disappointment was expressed however in the level of student services provided by the University in such areas as careers and guidance. The students attributed some of the lack of student services to the constricted nature of the current campus, believing that the institution had now outgrown that campus, and hoped that provision such as the library, private study spaces and the student cafeteria would be improved upon the planned move to a new campus. However, they also expressed a feeling that the University did little to support and guide its students, usually leaving them to fend for themselves.

The University did not operate an alumni association which might, amongst other activities, mentor current graduates on career options. Nevertheless the University claimed high employment rates for its graduates and even for students who had yet to complete, but could not provide evidence of this as destination statistics were not collected. The University also suggested that most undergraduates continuing to postgraduate study preferred to do so abroad but again no systematic collection of that information took place.

The students reported the standard student life cycle (from admission to registration, to timetabling, to assessment) was overall adequately administered and ran to time as far as the delivery of their programmes was concerned. Programme-related information such as curricular content, assessment briefs and assessment results were readily available online or upon request. However, the students offered a negative picture of the level and clarity of general student information provided by the University and of the support offered by the University to promote the Student Organisation. This had little uptake of active membership, despite its linkage to the national student body, a programme of activities and recruitment attempts by the small core of students who were engaged with it. There was however reported to be an active association of international students. The team also found low take-up of student representation opportunities within the University's deliberative committee structure and minimal appreciation of students as an asset to be harnessed rather than a liability to be serviced.

The students offered a mixed picture of their experience of the teaching delivery offered by individual academic staff, reporting that there was considerable variability between lecturers, who came from a diverse range of nationalities and educational backgrounds. Some delivery was reported to be too fast, cramming volumes of material into too little time. Some lecturers were said to be too didactic, distributing handouts and fielding questions but not offering motivation to their students. Students reported some lecturers lacked responsiveness to student innovation and initiative, preferring to limit students to answering in the way prescribed by the set text. However, the extensive use of project and group work was generally welcomed by students, although the small cohort sizes meant that interactions between the same students became somewhat predictable. The students were also positive about the University's arrangements for, and proficiency in, delivery in the English language. Students confirmed that they were assessed on their level of English and offered support in preparation for and during their studies if necessary.

Students reported that they voted with their feet and only attended lectures where they felt the lecturer added value to their study. More disappointingly, students stated that even when they raised concerns about unsatisfactory delivery there was little evidence that the University took this seriously; resolved those issues; and reported back to students on what had been done. Students offered the view that the University should do more to standardise the level of delivery and support by individual lecturers.

The Deans acknowledged that the University encompassed a wide range of diverse and individual teaching styles but did nothing to standardise or enhance them, relying on individual staff expertise. Despite this reliance on individual staff expertise, the University did not foster the exchange of good teaching practice as might be done by offering a staff development programme (although supposedly a lecturer might be supported to extend an external programme) or by promoting collegial forums in which academic staff might discuss and compare such practice. Teaching delivery was left to the individual lecturer's discretion. The academic staff whom the team met expressed themselves to be tempted to be demotivated by the failure of the University on a number of points: to promote the sharing and enhancement of professional practice; to attempt to resolve and to feedback to academic staff on severe operational issues which impacted on their ability to deliver the curriculum to students; to address effectively the issues caused by the divisiveness of a two tier salary system (Macedonian and foreign); and the lack of a reward system for good or additional teaching.

For students, the level of academic and tutorial support was said to be very much dependant on the approach of the individual lecturer. Students with whom the team met reported that the Rector (whom students claimed not to have seen since their induction) and Deans were not known to the students or regarded as approachable. The Deans themselves however believed that students would and did approach them with problems. Whereas students advised that problems would be raised with an individual lecturer, who might or might not be responsive, or even with peers. There was minimal awareness, for example, of how to raise a complaint or an academic appeal even though formal arrangements for those processes were in place. Students had no awareness of the opportunities potentially available to them to influence institutional decision-making through student representation on the University committee structure.

## **Recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Consider the adoption of an overarching system of quality assurance, for example, perhaps underpin the quality of its academic provision by mapping this against the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
- Consider the assignment of specific responsibility for quality assurance to a person or body within the University, for example a Quality Assurance lead person or Quality Assurance Office.

- Ensure the more systematic collection and use of management and student information to inform quality assurance and decision-making.
- Improve both the “closing of the loop” in reporting back to students on their feedback to the institution and the dissemination of its student-focused information, such as their entitlement to access University complaints and academic appeal processes.
- Strengthen considerably its support for careers and guidance.
- Set minimum standards for teaching delivery, monitor those standards and offer academic staff development opportunities to assist its diverse academic staff in meeting those standards.
- Promote the discussion and exchange of good teaching practice by facilitating collegial forums for academic staff.

#### **4. Teaching and learning**

In its self-evaluation report the University stated that "...a modern approach ... means that students are participants in the overall teaching and educational activities, not only users. This implies a need for attention to the importance of the following elements in realising teaching educational process: lectures are comprehensible to students; lectures are supported by examples from practice to realise the principle of connection between theory and practice, i.e. students gain applicable knowledge; assessment of acquired knowledge should be directed towards discovering knowledge, not detecting flaws that are not significant for a given scientific field...". In the absence of other strategic statements on teaching and learning the team took this to be an articulation of the University aspirations in this area.

The University has a specific undergraduate (both three and four year programmes) and a limited taught postgraduate academic portfolio based upon the University's mission areas of Information Science, Computer Science and Technology. The portfolio is stretched across a perhaps over elaborately differentiated range of nine programmes and their pathways. Although to retain its University status it is required to comprise at least five faculties, the team believed a rationalisation of that portfolio of programmes and pathways might allow the University to deliver its teaching offer more efficiently.

The University aims to expand gradually into more postgraduate provision but is required to have successfully graduated at least one cohort of undergraduates in the related discipline before proposing a new postgraduate programme. The University expects the main impediment to taught postgraduate expansion to be the recruitment of staff with relevant niche expertise. It believes its taught postgraduate offer will be affordable and attractive to new self-funded students and continuing Macedonian and foreign students. A similar previous cohort requirement applies to its eventual proposed expansion into research degree programmes.

Programme design, approval, amendment and review were seen by the Deans as falling within the five year cycle of national accreditation (which was viewed as a comprehensive and exhaustive process which included a self-evaluation exercise) even though the University's portfolio was in fast-evolving disciplines with dynamic curricula. The team were informed that the key factors in that accreditation process were: any changed national Board of Accreditation requirements; external and internal academic staff views; and some very limited student input. The University estimated that the curriculum would change roughly 20% of overall content at accreditation and mainly in elective components. The University did little to demonstrate to the team that learning resources (library and IT) were planned, reviewed and upgraded as a systematic part of its programme approval, monitoring and review processes.

The team was told that that staff expertise rather than labour market need was the prime driver in determining the focus of new programmes for development. The team was told that



with funding from a research project, Analysing Market Needs, the University had attempted to work with industry partners to identify new programme areas for development, although active engagement from industry partners had been limited.

The University also reported that central government restraints on curriculum development prevented much broadening of the curriculum and that the national accreditation body effectively controlled the curriculum leaving the institution with minimal discretion. However, the University argued that staff expertise and recent experience meant that the programmes delivered were industry-relevant enough for graduates to secure appropriate employment or to progress to relevant higher study. There was effectively no annual or otherwise regular monitoring of programmes in place other than the student satisfaction surveys. The team was told that the University did not have the resources and its staff did not have the time to carry out such monitoring and that changes, for example, the development of clearly stated learning objectives, would be made only when reaccreditation was due. However, due account was said to be taken of industry and regional practice and student feedback at accreditation and reaccreditation.

The self-evaluation group whom the team met advised that the teaching and learning aspirations set out in the SER were partly met by the policy of requiring students to select elective subjects outside mainstream IT so that the first two years of any degree developed critical and adaptive thinking skills. They were also partly met by the maintenance of an appropriate balance between theory and practice and by seeking to develop employable graduates with work-oriented problem-solving and thinking skills. This was achieved by the provision of practical work, projects, laboratory work and placement opportunities in addition to the delivery of theoretical curricular content. Most students studied full-time and the University reported little local demand for part-time study not least because there were few employment opportunities in the region in the University's disciplines.

The Vice-Rector reported that the University's completion rate was better than the national average (other staff estimated that only 10% of students took more than four years to complete) and had improved since the adoption of the standard Bologna study cycles. However, it was noted that the withdrawal rate was difficult to calculate as a considerable period of grace was permitted before a student was deemed to have withdrawn (some staff estimated a withdrawal rate of about 15%, though other sources later suggested the figure to be lower). He did however identify student inability to cope with the demands of mathematics within the syllabus as a key factor in withdrawal. However, the team noted that there was no evidence on which to base these assertions as the University had already advised that there was no systematic recording and use of such information. Interestingly the student perception of those rates was that withdrawal rates were higher than the estimates given and timely completion rates were lower.

Work placements were a mandatory, nationally required, credit-bearing element of all programmes, usually taking place in the summer before the final year of study. The University oversaw placements through the appointment of a placement mentor for each placement

student. In a meeting with Deans, the team was advised that there were few related employment and placement opportunities in the region and many employers saw the one month placement opportunity as of limited use to their organisations and something of a waste of their own employee resource in terms of supervising and mentoring placement students. The Deans believed a longer, more meaningful placement arrangement should be devised by the University, which might better convince employers of its usefulness. Academic staff also claimed that national regulation prevented them from developing even longer duration sandwich components within programmes. The team heard similar views echoed in a meeting with students and saw merit in a rethinking of arrangements for placements.

The self-evaluation group advised that all study programmes were set in a form of programme specification which included a description of subject topics covered (courses) and learning outcomes. Study programmes were compliant with ECTS, with the required amount of effort reflecting the award of credits, and Diploma Supplements were made available. However, the University admitted that there was no systematic monitoring of the ECTS arrangements once in place other than at the discretion of individual academic staff. Academic staff drew on their wide experience of the operation of ECTS elsewhere to inform their own and general practice in the University. Credit values were devised by the University's academic staff in the context of national accreditation arrangements but operating with a certain degree of discretion.

The University's learning outcomes predated the recently approved National Qualification Framework and were therefore not informed by this. Study programme specifications were written in English and were fully available to students throughout the programme as well as being explained at the start of each course. These study programme specifications contained the detail of learning outcomes and the required achievement levels. Again, the main driver was the need for compliance with national accreditation requirements but there was no systematic monitoring of the arrangements once in place other than at the discretion of individual academic staff.

Academic staff believed themselves to be empowered to deliver the syllabus "within a discretion of up to 30%" which in part encouraged academic staff to draw on their research to inform their teaching, although this was in no way systematised across the University. The academic staff whom the team met advised that they had full autonomy with regard to teaching delivery methods but within the context of the University's general approach, so theory was usually a precursor to practical application. They also tended to deliver basic and core elements in a traditional class or laboratory setting so that individuals were responsible for their own learning but to deliver later elements to teams of students who, even further on, were then made to compete in their teams.

The University has clear assessment regulations in place. These were described by the Vice-Rector as simple and basic with explicit grading criteria. However, their implementation relied exclusively on individual discretion and no moderation process was applied. Assessment was chiefly through mid-term and final examinations, but the team wondered whether the

number of assessment opportunities available at each level was not too high, with a total of five opportunities comprising two takes and three retakes. This was an inefficient use of resources and especially a drain upon staff time. Students expressed dissatisfaction that all assessment was in writing and even highly technical subjects, such as programming, did not have project or electronic assessment.

Both academic staff and students reported academic misconduct, not only inadvertent plagiarism but also outright cheating, to be endemic. The team believed this might in part be attributable to the lack of information and training offered to students by the University on good academic practice and the avoidance of plagiarism. However, it was also in part the fault of a too lenient scale of punishment within University procedures for such academic misconduct.

Academic staff reported that good practice and teaching delivery were supposed to be discussed and reviewed at formal faculty level meetings, sometimes on a sole faculty basis but other times cross-faculty, especially as many core courses were delivered on a cross-faculty basis. The team saw no evidence of such discussion in Faculty Teaching Council documentation.

Academic staff delivered on three or four courses, usually three undergraduate and one postgraduate, coming to a total of 9 or 12 hours a week direct contact (and allowing for two hours additional work for each direct hour of contact therefore a total of 27 or 36 hours a week dedicated to teaching alone before research and administrative duties were factored in). In one instance, a member of staff was required to deliver on six undergraduate courses, so 18 hours direct contact and a total of 54 hours a week dedicated solely to teaching.

Academic staff overall did not believe the staffing complement to be sufficient to deliver the University's perhaps overstretched programme and pathway portfolio. A panel of three staff members provisionally assigned staff to deliver particular programmes and courses, taking account of consultation with staff and their disciplinary expertise. However, the expertise available, especially amongst foreign staff where there was a high turnover, meant that not all curricular areas could be delivered by subject specialists. The Rector then finalised the assignment of staff. Any residual gaps were met by additional workload, especially for the Macedonian staff, or occasionally by the short-term, fractional appointment of visiting staff from another Macedonian university. The University offered no evidence of a workload balancing model which would assess the staff input required to deliver its mission and would allow a transparent comparison of the workload falling to individual members of staff. Perhaps in that context unsurprisingly, staff were also not aware of the University providing any sabbatical opportunities.

The Vice-Rector explained that undergraduate recruitment was something of a mixed bag with variations in entry criteria and funding for Macedonian students depending on whether the student was within the State quota for a scholarship. Following a push to increase the national participation rate, entry criteria for some students were relatively low and students

from this source were not always the most motivated. Additionally, the University recruited a private quota of mainly regional Macedonian students. Their fee level was higher but the University was able to be more selective. Institutional fee waivers were available for the best students and students from disadvantaged circumstances. The Vice-Rector regarded the volume of recruitment as steady and indeed rising slightly overall but with decreases on certain programmes.

Unsuccessful or declining programmes were usually suspended rather than closed, as actual closure involved considerable co-ordination with the Ministry of Education and Science.

The University's current campus comprised a two-storey city centre building in refurbished, state-owned army offices. There were standard classrooms and a large lecture theatre. The spaces designated as technical laboratories seemed to be further standard classrooms but with some additional communal laptops. Up to four academic staff had to share each office. There was no student cafeteria and minimal social space for students, which the team felt was detrimental to the higher education "feel" of the campus for students and should be corrected. The University consistently claimed that there was significant overcrowding on the current campus, although on the particular day on which the team toured the campus this was not in evidence.

The library was small and was also used for lectures, limiting its suitability for private study. A restricted number of standard key texts were available in the admittedly limited library and in 2015 reading lists had been updated and twenty more modern texts had been purchased. The team was told that learning resources were adequate but the tendency was to factor in delivery options which were not resource intensive as budgets were not large and the University procurement process was slow. Initially, in 2009, technical teaching texts in English had been procured via the publisher, Pearson. These were then supplemented by a redundant grant by central government of texts in Macedonian, which remained unused as all delivery continued to be in English. The library offered access to only one e-journal and was hampered by a low, or in some years non-existent, budget. The current library was regarded by students as inadequate in terms of study space and printed learning resources. Students tended to rely on the Internet and external websites and the University's virtual learning environment for learning resources.

The University offered a small number of communal student laptops, secured to desks in classrooms but the expectation was that students would normally use their own laptops. No true laboratory environments or other IT specialist hardware, of the sort which students might find once in employment, were evidenced. Indeed some students reported that the IT hardware available compared unfavourably with that available in their former high schools. A team of two IT technicians offered support. Staff were provided with a laptop or a desktop computer. Internet access was limited. Information was limited on the IT software resources available within the University, other than freeware, although it was intimated that the high cost sometimes prompted unlicensed use. The team was unable to determine how staff and

students overcame the University's limited licensed access to e-journals and otherwise accessed subject literature.

The team was not convinced that the existing library and IT infrastructure, both hardware and software, allowed the University to deliver its mission in either teaching or research.

The team was told that the University was moving to a new campus, over two kilometres from the city centre, again in a state-owned, refurbished, former army barracks, although there was some doubt about the actual transfer date because of accidental damage to the refurbished building. It was claimed that certain IT hardware could not be accommodated in the current campus and was therefore in store at the new campus. In view of the low level of IT hardware provision at the current campus the team felt this claim to be entirely unjustified. With no firm date yet known for the transfer it was not sufficient for the University to regard such a transfer of campus as a panacea to resource needs, especially in relation to the library and IT. The team was not convinced that the executive management of the University was actively seeking to address deficiencies in these areas in a strategic manner.

## **Recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Consider a rationalisation of its portfolio of programmes and pathways so as to improve the efficiency of its teaching delivery.
- Review the timing and duration of the mandatory work placement, in consultation with employers and the Ministry of Education and Science, with a view to developing a more mutually beneficial and meaningful purpose to that placement.
- Develop and apply more systematically procedures for programme design (factoring in especially labour market need) and for regular programme monitoring.
- Offer students more information and training on good academic practice and the avoidance of plagiarism and revise its procedures so that more appropriate sanctions are applied in the event of academic misconduct.
- Urgently review the sufficiency of the University's library and IT infrastructure.
- Provide a student cafeteria and/or other social space for students.

## **5. Research**

The Vice-Rector reported that the University placed emphasis on research (and international) projects and had enjoyed tangible success moving from fifth to third place in national rankings and also improving significantly in the Shanghai ranking with a good publication record in key journals and a 40% conversion rate in research project applications to approvals. This was despite being a new university, competing with established universities, and the lack of doctoral students available to assist researchers. Postgraduate taught and final year undergraduate students were used instead of doctoral students. The Vice-Rector attributed this comparative success to the tactical targeting of smaller more accessible European Union and national project funds. In part this success was also attributed to the diverse nature of the academic staff who as individuals had good contacts with foreign universities and international research networks.

The team was not informed of any articulated research strategy. Research was said to be initiated, motivated and led by the Rector via informal “Monday Morning” and monthly “Research and Coffee” meetings, although such meetings would mostly have to be virtual in the context of the Rector’s frequent absence from campus. Ad hoc research groupings, often cross-disciplinary and ideally comprising two academic staff, two research assistants and two doctoral students, were self-organised with the main aim to secure externally funded research projects under funding streams such as Horizon 2020. Obtaining such project funding was more important than an institutional level research strategy or individual staff research interests. The University saw such projects as its current research focus and, in the context of a constrained core budget, the optimum way to secure and expand the staffing base and enhance facilities and equipment.

Research was not organised within Research Centres, with the two Research Centres specified on the website relating to dormant former Marie Curie projects without continuation of funding. This was a typical example of a lacklustre web presence disappointing for a University with research ambition, especially in its core area of Information Science and Technology.

Macedonian academic staff on standard contracts were set minimum individual research targets both by the University and in accordance with national requirements, such as the publication of at least two papers a year in ISI indexed journals or good conference proceedings and a requirement that research would also inform the teaching process and that all three core activities: teaching, research and administration would be discharged. Overall the Macedonian staff felt that their workloads were too onerous and inappropriately balanced.

However, foreign staff were retained on annually renewable contracts for intellectual services, which did not allow them to discharge key administration and leadership functions. Contract

renewal was informed by achievement of University-set research targets including publications, research impact, project applications and approvals, and teaching targets such as “performance in delivery” as determined through the student satisfaction survey. Such contracts had previously lasted three years but the team was informed by the University that the central government had requested that the duration of the contracts be reduced to one year. This had a destabilising impact on the staffing complement and on activities such as the supervision of postgraduate theses. The foreign staff whom the team met offered differing opinions on whether their workloads allowed teaching and research to be carried out effectively.

The University had no concept of, or process for, career development for its staff. Less experienced staff said that more senior staff were too busy with their own workloads to offer support in areas such as research and that they fell back on their own personal and professional networks. The University had no systematic arrangements in place for the sharing of practice or mentoring, for example in research, between its Macedonian and foreign staff.

The University had offered internal pump-priming funds competitively to these ad hoc research groupings again with the aim of developing successful applications for externally funded research projects. The team was told that feedback on those internal applications was still pending, even though this feedback was several months behind the original timescale and therefore might be ineffective for proposals needing to be ready for external deadlines. Additionally, the University had previously sought to support individual staff research activity, such as conference attendance and networking, via up front “base funding” of 600-700 Euros a year and by permitting the retention, for local level research staff use, of 40% of research income without overheads. National auditors had objected to this “base funding” as a means of potentially circumventing salary restrictions but the team believes that the University could still support such activity by retrospective reimbursement.

The University was vague on how research activity was monitored other than by the completion of six monthly internal returns on research activity. These fed into a nationally required four yearly report (for Macedonian staff on standard contracts), which was said to be signed off by the Research Committee and Senate before submission.

The Vice-Rector advised that despite having a framework in place to allow such activity, the University had not yet been able to generate income from entrepreneurial activity such as spin offs or patents.

A doctoral programme remained a University ambition achievable only after one cohort had graduated from the postgraduate taught level, although the team was advised that the Rector had decided to put further work on a formal application for a doctoral programme on hold. In the interim, the University had done little to develop its research capacity, which could be done, for instance, by entering into a partnership with a research degree awarding partner so

that the University might offer co-supervision. Furthermore, its appointment of research dedicated staff other than directly to projects was hampered by the requirement to obtain Ministry of Finance approval and consent to hire.

## **Recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Articulate a research strategy to be duly monitored and evaluated by a realistic implementation/action plan.
  
- Develop a simple and transparent workload balancing model which, in particular, would assess the staff input required to deliver its overall mission and especially its research output.
  
- Regularly update its website, and especially its research presence, including the deletion of reference to its dormant Research Centres.



## **6. Service to society**

The University offered minimal evidence in its self-evaluation report or during the team visits of an interest in, or consideration of, the concept of service to society and did not evidence reciprocal participation in activities with external stakeholders other than two off-site meetings with a multi-national employer recently located in Ohrid, and with officials of the City of Ohrid. Otherwise all staff struggled to call to mind successful and continuing initiatives in this area. The University perceived there to be little local demand for lifelong learning opportunities in the region in the University's disciplines.

At no stage did the University articulate a systematised or monitored strategic approach to such activity. In a meeting with Deans the team was advised that there was only limited stakeholder input into the University which attempted merely to achieve the minimum legally required level of employer engagement.

The multi-national employer emphasised how important the existence of the University had been in its selection of Ohrid as a new manufacturing base, but this development had been so recent that there was as yet little actual reciprocal activity, although both sides recognised the potential for this. The team recognised that the number of employers in and around Ohrid with activities directly related to the University's disciplines was limited and the University felt at a disadvantage against other nearer higher education institutions when trying to develop partnerships with appropriate employers based in the capital, Skopje, and elsewhere in the Republic of Macedonia.

A high level local government representative spoke of the importance of the University in attracting external investment and employment opportunities as well as improving the retention in the region of higher education students and graduates. They also spoke of the potential for the University to diversify (possibly into Social Sciences and/or Environmental Sciences), to contribute to the development of the city as a higher education hub, and to co-operate with the city to create a Macedonian Measurement Laboratory for a nascent electronics industry and employers such as Kostal. However, there was nothing offered from the University side to confirm its interest in those potential developments. Even with this key partner, which was keen to ensure a supportive environment for the development of the University and to ensure a successful partnership based on mutual interest with the University, there was no evidence offered of pro-activity on the University's part. Similarly, the local government representative did not take up the University's suggestion that it might champion digital education to the local community.

Although the city did not provide direct funding to the University, it had a strong track record in supporting it in practical areas such as the proposed relocation to a new campus and in the provision of dormitory accommodation for students. There were some examples of University operational engagement with the city such as assisting local schools with their websites, assistance from the city in the promotion of the University in local schools and co-operation and use of respective facilities for the Ohrid Annual Cultural Day. However, these were

relatively small scale and did not include, for example, the city providing placement opportunities for students or using the University as a formally retained consultant.

The students with whom the team met spoke of opportunities to engage with the city, the local community and even local employers through such activities as the Hackathon and the Culture Day. However, there was no evidence of the University facilitating or supporting such activities which sprang solely from the initiative of individuals.

## **Recommendation**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Initiate a more strategic, systematised and monitored approach to its engagement with external stakeholders.

## **7. Internationalisation**

The University put forward limited evidence in its self-evaluation report or during the team visits of any strategic approach to internationalisation, other than mention of a bespoke strategic statement on internationalisation created to ensure compliance with its application for Erasmus funding. The Vice-Rector stated that the University placed emphasis on internationalisation (and research) projects and had enjoyed tangible success moving upwards in the national and Shanghai rankings. The University reported to have generated 2,000,000 Euros in income in four years, despite not being eligible as a non-member to access EU Structural Funds, chiefly via EU Pre-Accession and Erasmus+ funds.

The team was informed that the University has around 90 partnerships of different types (joint conferences, joint project development, Horizon 2020 and especially Erasmus exchange partnerships), although some were dormant and some memoranda of co-operation never produced actual joint activity. However, there was no strategic consideration of how the elements of an internationalisation strategy (such as the development of international partnerships and the attraction of international students) might interplay and, the expectation was that individual staff would take forward partnership arrangements on their own initiative using a University template on its website.

As previously mentioned, the University itself was effectively the product of a central government internationalisation initiative to attract foreign investment and to develop high value employment opportunities in the Republic of Macedonia. As such, the University received funding to recruit foreign academic staff and students.

Government scholarships were offered to foreign students, and these mainly attracted students from countries with a similar or lower cost of living than in the Republic of Macedonia. Selection for such a scholarship was by a central government panel with some limited University representation. The University had been less successful in initiatives to recruit foreign students directly without recourse to central government scholarships. The University attributed this failure to an insufficient budget for marketing.

The University had experienced severe delays in the processing of scholarship students by central government agencies in matters such as the granting of entry visas and the recognition of foreign qualifications, to such an extent that foreign students often arrived late for their programmes. This meant an additional burden for the University in terms of further induction sessions and the repeat of early elements of study programmes for latecomers. The team wondered whether, as an IT-focused University, there was not some way of integrating late-arriving students through online provision and the virtual learning environment rather than through repeated delivery of the same real time provision.

With regards to academic staff, the self-evaluation group argued that the positive side of the University's recruitment of foreign academic staff with academic qualifications obtained from top 500 universities in the global rankings was not just individual expertise but also the

delivery to students by a multi-cultural and widely experienced academic staff. They also advised that all academic staff were encouraged to develop links with foreign and other Macedonian universities to broaden that experience.

One of the University's promotion requirements for academic staff was that time should also have been spent since qualification in a top 500 or specialist IT institution. This was notionally supported by an allowance of time and travel expenses. The University had also successfully obtained Erasmus mobility grants. In addition, several of the University's foreign staff were employed simultaneously on a fractional basis in more than one institution.

Both students and staff valued the diversity and breadth of experiences and backgrounds that this brought to the campus but, in terms of the general institutional culture, both groupings noted a lack of the integration between foreign and Macedonian staff and, to a lesser extent, between foreign and Macedonian students. In the case of the staff this may derive from the differentiated salaries, terms and conditions of service and opportunities to be involved in institutional decision-making. In both cases the lack of a systematic and strategic approach to internationalisation is undoubtedly also a cause.

Academic staff advised that the internationalisation of the syllabus drew upon a mirroring of syllabi in higher education in the United States and the individual expertise of academic staff.

The University's use of the English language for delivery was also a particular strength, which attracted both foreign and Macedonian students. The students whom the team met reported that the English language level of all academic staff was generally good. The University also used the English language as an operational language and the administrative staff whom the team met were proficient.

The University undertook some international staff exchanges, although staff advised that the Rector personally determined eligibility for staff exchanges without recourse to a formal selection system. Staff believed that the University should offer staff more international exchange opportunities than it currently did.

The University undertook international student exchanges, some incoming but more outgoing, through Erasmus. The incoming and outgoing students whom the team met saw this as a particular strength of the University as its small size meant that students had a very good chance of being selected to benefit from an Erasmus exchange experience.

Incoming and outgoing Erasmus student exchange applications were assessed by a panel of three academic staff who looked at a basic curriculum mapping of the respective programme contents and a draft Erasmus learning agreement. For Erasmus and for all admissions the University used Ministry of Education and Science guidance to determine the equivalence of foreign qualifications. The University and students themselves were aware of some variability of assessment standards and marking scales in the countries and institutions from which outgoing students returned and on occasion, and whenever an outright assessment failure had occurred, additional study and assessment had to be undertaken at the University.

For outgoing mobility, students effectively selected the proposed venue for study abroad and most chose lower cost of living destinations comparable to the economic level of the Republic of Macedonia.

Students were broadly complimentary about the University's provision for exchanges, although one negative aspect was that exposure to higher education elsewhere made them less satisfied with the delivery and facilities at the University itself. Academic staff also openly expressed their support for the University's encouragement of Erasmus student exchanges both incoming and outgoing and welcomed the fostering of an international and multi-cultural learning environment by the University.

Overall the University showed strong and transparent arrangements for the organisation and uptake of Erasmus student exchanges. The team felt that the University provided dedicated and adequate staffing for that area of activity, and that it might learn from that example that the successful operation of particular activities often depended on the investment in dedicated and adequate staffing to organise and to monitor those activities.

## **Recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Initiate a more strategic, systematised and monitored approach to internationalisation.
  
- Develop online provision and its virtual learning environment to ensure the better and more efficient integration of any late-arriving foreign students into its programmes.

## **8. Conclusion**

The team applauded the initial vision which had resulted in the establishment of such a University with central government support for the recruitment of foreign academic staff and students, focusing solely on Information Science and Technology, delivered in the English language. Central government had seen this as a catalyst for the attraction of foreign investment and the development of high value employment opportunities in the region and in the Republic of Macedonia more widely.

The team met committed academic and administrative staff who did their best to balance the heavy demands of high teaching loads and of generating research activity and income. The team met foreign and Macedonian students who were keen to learn but who often had to fall back on their own resourcefulness and initiative to succeed in the absence of sufficient learning resources, facilities and other support from the University.

However, the team had serious concerns about the sustainability of the University. In part this was due to external limitations, such as insufficient budget and restrictive national legislation which did not allow for the unique circumstances of this University.

However, serious concerns also stemmed from the highly centralised nature of the University (especially in the context of the frequent absence from campus of the Rector). Several staff commented on the lack of visible leadership and the failure to engage with them or feedback to them on immediate and major operational difficulties, which had every chance of harming the students' learning experience at the University. This problem was exacerbated by the lack of strategic planning and effective implementation. Other than the promissory note of the Rector's Platform, the University seemed to live hand to mouth with little demonstration of thought-through approaches, processes and contingency arrangements.

The team encourages the University to reflect on the findings of this report and hopes that the recommendations provided will be of help to the University in its next phase of development.

## **Summary of the recommendations**

The Team recommends that the University:

- Continue to seek discretion from the national authorities, perhaps after consideration of any innovative practice in other higher education institutions in the Republic of Macedonia, for the legitimisation of modes of governance and structure which offer the University greater discretion to operate effectively in its unique circumstances.
- Adopt a more participative approach to encouraging engagement by all staff and students, working actively with the Student Organisation to promote student

- engagement in the formulation of strategy and its implementation and in institutional decision-making.
- Review its internal quality criteria for the recruitment of academic staff to ensure that these do not inhibit the recruitment of good academic staff.
  - Decentralise decision-making in the University through formal delegation so that the Vice-Rector and Deans are duly empowered.
  - Clarify the remits of Senate and the Rector's Board and, as part of the proposed decentralisation of decision-making, ensure that they meet regularly and make meaningful contributions to the governance and management of the University.
  - Ensure the monitoring and evaluation of the University's strategy through duly monitored and evaluated action plans which set out informed realistic priorities, appropriate resource allocation and locus of responsibility for delivery.
  - Consider the adoption of an overarching system of quality assurance, for example, perhaps underpin the quality of its academic provision by mapping this against the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
  - Consider the assignment of specific responsibility for quality assurance to a person or body within the University, for example a Quality Assurance lead person or Quality Assurance Office.
  - Ensure the more systematic collection and use of management and student information to inform quality assurance and decision-making.
  - Improve both the "closing of the loop" in reporting back to students on their feedback to the institution and the dissemination of its student-focused information, such as their entitlement to access University complaints and academic appeal processes.
  - Strengthen considerably its support for careers and guidance.
  - Set minimum standards for teaching delivery, monitor those standards and offer academic staff development opportunities to assist its diverse academic staff to meet those standards.
  - Promote the discussion and exchange of good teaching practice by facilitating collegial forums for academic staff.
  - Consider a rationalisation of its portfolio of programmes and pathways so as to improve the efficiency of its teaching delivery.

- Review the timing and duration of the mandatory work placement, in consultation with employers and the Ministry of Education and Science, with a view to developing a more mutually beneficial and meaningful purpose to that placement.
- Develop and apply more systematically procedures for programme design (factoring in especially labour market need) and for regular programme monitoring.
- Offer students more information and training on good academic practice and the avoidance of plagiarism and revise its procedures so that more appropriate sanctions are applied in the event of academic misconduct.
- Urgently review the sufficiency of the University's library and IT infrastructure.
- Provide a student cafeteria and/or other social space for students.
- Articulate a Research Strategy to be duly monitored and evaluated by a realistic implementation/action plan.
- Develop a simple and transparent workload balancing model which, in particular, would assess the staff input required to deliver its overall mission and especially its research output.
- Regularly update its website and especially its research presence, including the deletion of reference to its dormant Research Centres.
- Initiate a more strategic, systematised and monitored approach to its engagement with external stakeholders.
- Initiate a more strategic, systematised and monitored approach to internationalisation.
- Develop online provision and its virtual learning environment to ensure the better and more efficient integration of any late-arriving foreign students into its programmes.