

ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI UNIVERSITY, BITOLA

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION REPORT

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Governance and institutional decision-making	7
3. Quality culture.....	11
4. Teaching and learning	14
5. Research	18
6. Service to society.....	22
7. Internationalisation	24
8. Conclusion.....	26
9. Summary of the recommendations	27

1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of St. Kliment Ohridski University, Bitola. European University Association's (EUA) Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated St. Kliment Ohridski University in 2017 with the report submitted to the university in December 2017. In 2019 the university subsequently requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the 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).

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

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

As for the original evaluation, all aspects of the follow-up process are also guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

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

1.2 St. Kliment Ohridski's (UKLO) profile

1.2.1 The political and economic landscape in North Macedonia continues to present challenges to the country's higher education sector. UKLO acknowledges these external factors in the general narrative of its self-evaluation report and, more specifically, in its SWOT analysis where it regards such constraints as serious threats to the future development and well-being of the university.

1.2.2 The dimensions of these threats range from new obstacles to North Macedonia's application to become a member of the EU to on-going downward pressures on the demographic entering higher education¹. A relatively fragile economy has stabilised in the period since 2010 but in

¹ In the SER it is noted that from 2017 - 2019 there was a fall in the total number of births from 22,163 to 20,487. The number of people aged between 15 and 24 (potential candidates for enrolment) reduced from 267,376 to 253,204 in the same period. This position was

March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, industrial production in North Macedonia dropped 13.4 percent year-on-year. It was the sharpest decline in industrial output since September 2010². Annual public expenditure on higher education has accounted for 0.8% of GDP in the last few years. The budget expenditure breakdown in 2018 shows that 50% of funds go towards salaries and allowances, 37% relate to goods and services (utilities, repairs, contracting and copyrights agreements with the employees), subsidies and transfers account for 7%, while capital expenditures account for only 6%³. It is notable that UKLO, as with other public universities, receives no public funding for research (science) and development. And as with all other world economies, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an extended negative impact on university life and wider society.

- 1.2.3 The country has also experienced on-going reforms to national higher education legislation, most recently with the introduction of a new higher education law in May 2018. Amongst other things, the 2018 law has promoted major changes to governance arrangements in universities and UKLO has been a sector front runner in introducing these new arrangements.
- 1.2.4 UKLO now sits alongside a growing number of HE institutions in North Macedonia, many placed in the private sector, and this has not helped in its efforts to reverse falling student enrolments. From 2017/18 to 2019/20 total student enrolments in all years of study fell from 6063 to 4708. Academic staff numbers have remained largely stable in the last 3 years, thus helping with staff - student ratios, while administrative and technical staff numbers have shown an 11% decline in the same period.
- 1.2.5 The university's main campus is based in Bitola, with 6 of the 12 faculties and units concentrated there. The other faculties and units are situated in Prilep, Ohrid, Skopje, Kichevo and Veles. Bitola and Struga are now the only sites for dispersed studies. The university maintains its comprehensive subject coverage with provision in, *inter alia*, medicine, technology, technical sciences, tourism and hospitality, law, economics, education and security. While the natural setting for the university is its local regions, it has a solid national presence and, increasingly, is seeking to cement academic associations in the wider Balkan higher education space.

1.3 The evaluation process

- 1.3.1 The self-evaluation process was undertaken by the university's Self-Evaluation Committee (the committee). This committee is an embedded part of the university's quality structures and takes the lead role in all external evaluations. The committee comprised the following:

Professor Dr Marija Malenkovska Todorova, Faculty of Technical Sciences (Chair)
Professor Dr Izabela Filov, Higher Medical School (Secretary)
Professor Dr Dean Iliev, Faculty of Education
Professor Dr Blagoj Ristevski, Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies
Professor Dr Sashe Gerasimoski, Faculty of Security
Associate Professor Ilija Hristoski, Faculty of Economics
Associate Professor Ice Ilievski, Faculty of Law

exacerbated by migration figures (1,599 for the period 2017 - 2019), of which 56% were aged between 15 and 24. (Source: State Statistical Office - Makstat).

² <https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/news>

³ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/republic-north-macedonia/higher-education-funding_en

Katerina Nikoloska, student, Faculty of Economics
Viktor Kuzmanovski, student, Higher Medical School

- 1.3.2 All members of the committee were subject to approval by the Senate following a secret vote. Five members were relatively new to the work of the committee while the other four members were experienced participants. It should be noted that the student members were proposed by the Student Parliament before their confirmation by the Senate.
- 1.3.3 In discussion with the team, members of the committee commented that they had been fully engaged with the university's consideration of the IEP report produced in December 2017. Following receipt of that report, all units of the university were asked to discuss the contents and recommendations and how they could respond from the perspective of their individual units. Students were encouraged to take part in these deliberations and to offer their own views on how the recommendations could be progressed. A progress report (January 2019) sent to the IEP had been signed off by the rector and the chair of the committee. Since then, the committee has set its priorities in line with the IEP recommendations, especially those that could be viewed as 'quick wins'.
- 1.3.4 In terms of the preparation of the follow-up self-evaluation report (SER), the committee had regular weekly on-line meetings to debate the various sections of the SER and the production of the draft document was brought together by the Head of the Committee with comprehensive support from the academic issues and quality assurance officer. The draft SER was distributed to all units and then the Rectorate for comment before being presented to the Senate for approval. The chair of the committee gave a presentation to both the Rectorate and the Senate to ensure that all aspects of the SER were fully understood.
- 1.3.5 The committee did not believe that its task had been made significantly more difficult by the Covid-19 pandemic; the team was told that all members had tackled the task with enthusiasm and data was received from the units in a helpful way. The university's iKnow data management system was utilised throughout the process. The committee also felt strongly supported in its work by the university's senior leadership.
- 1.3.6 The self-evaluation report of the St. Kliment Ohridski University, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in January 2021.
- 1.3.7 Given the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, the physical site visit by the IEP team, due to take place in November 2020, was unable to go ahead as planned. Subsequently, the university agreed with IEP that the evaluation should take place through a series of on-line meetings. The on-line meetings took place between 10-19 May, 2021.
- 1.3.8 The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:
- Professor Tatjana Volkova, former Rector, School of Business and Finance, Latvia, team chair
Professor Mar Campins Eritja, Department of Criminal Law and Criminology and of Public International Law and International Relations, University of Barcelona, Spain
Damian Michalik, doctoral student, University of Warsaw, Poland
Dr Raymond Smith, former Academic Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator

1.3.9 The team thanks the Rector, Professor, Dr. Sasho Korunovski for his invitation to undertake this follow-up evaluation and for his personal interest and involvement in the process, to the Self-Evaluation Committee, chaired by Professor, Dr. Marija Malenkovska Todorova, to staff, students, and external stakeholders for being open in discussions and to the team's interpreters and the entire support team behind the preparation of the online meetings.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

- 2.1 A natural focus for the team in its discussions with the university's senior leadership was the May 2018 Higher Education law and the way it has affected approaches to institutional governance and changes to the UKLO organisational structures. The team was advised that two elements of the law had been at the forefront of developments. First, the requirement to elect an independent president of the Senate and secondly, the formalisation of the involvement of students in the governance and decision-making structures of the university.
- 2.2 The team was interested to hear from senior leaders that they viewed these legislative changes in a mostly positive light. In terms of the appointment of an independent president of the Senate, the university decided that it should look to enhance collegiality by inviting the president of the Senate to be part of Rector's Collegium thus bringing together the executive and deliberative arms of UKLO in wide ranging discussions on the future of the university and not just the formal business of the Senate. During its 2017 evaluation, the team had not found any democratic deficit linked to the combining of the roles of rector and president of the Senate. It was commented in the IEP report that the broad arrangements for governance were viewed as sound and appropriate.
- 2.3 Clearly, there are various models in higher education for ensuring good governance at the senior levels of the executive and the deliberative arms of a university. Senior leaders at UKLO commented that they had not found any obstacles to decision-making following this change in the law. University business proceeded on the basis of the strategic action plan and discussion and proactive debate flowed smoothly through the appropriate forums before consideration by the Senate. Senators were also confident in these arrangements, although they recognised the on-going constraints on their role because of a lack of university autonomy in the key area of finance. The SER makes clear that little has changed in funding terms since the last IEP visit and that the failure of the North Macedonia government to establish a National Council to oversee the higher education sector and its funding means that central government income distribution to universities is "not based on the realistic requirements of the University and of the units." The need for Ministry approval for staff appointments is a particular constraint on the university's ability to develop its activities across all areas of endeavour. The view was expressed by some senators that such financial constraints contributed to the tendency at UKLO to view things in the short term with an inevitable focus on basic sustainability. The team, however, is pleased to see that the university has approached this important change in governance with confidence and an open-mind. *The team recommends, therefore, that the UKLO continues to reinforce the positive working relationship between the Rectorate and the president of the Senate so that key institutional changes can be developed and agreed upon with maximum flexibility and agility.*
- 2.4 The legal obstacles to the formal involvement of students in the university's governance arrangements had been noted during the last IEP visit. At that point the team had recommended that, outside of formal structures, increased efforts should be made to engage the student voice in the development and operation of the university. This has clearly been a priority for the university in the intervening three years and it is noted in the SER that "the University self-evaluation committee was holding meetings with students from all units, with a single mission of presenting to them the significance of their proactive involvement in the activities of the institution...". The team is impressed with this approach and there is a real sense that the adoption of the May 2018 law, as it relates to formal student engagement in decision-making, has been made easier by the laying of this informal groundwork by the self-evaluation committee. The team met a range of students from across UKLO, including those with representative roles on university

and faculty committees, and also those with responsibilities in the new Student Parliament. To a very large degree, they spoke positively about the formalisation of the student role in governance and institutional decision-making. They were able to confirm a good working relationship with the rector and that this had been particularly appreciated during the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of the visit, the team was unable to form a considered view on how far this student engagement currently extends into the more strategic debates about university development. The team recommends, therefore, that *the university builds on the current progress in embracing the student voice and makes sure that students' involvement in governance becomes securely embedded in the working of the university at both strategic and operational levels.*

- 2.5 There is always a danger that the initial burst of enthusiasm from the student body in response to its enhanced role in helping to shape the university can dissipate as some of the timescales for change extend into the medium to long term. This is an inevitable part of strategic planning and change management, and students must be supported in understanding these aspects of change and the need for student engagement to be maintained over cohorts and over time. In the view of the team this level of understanding can be underpinned by the provision of *training to students to increase their awareness and understanding of their role as one of the driving forces of UKLO's overall development.* Obviously, these are relatively early days in assessing the impact of these changes on the operation of the university, but the team is impressed by the university's capacity to adapt to, and embrace, these new and important dimensions of governance.
- 2.6 The team shares the university's disappointment at its inability to establish the University Council at the apex of its organisational structure. This absence was noted during the 2017 visit and, since that time, the university leadership has made regular efforts to pursue the matter with the appropriate government ministries and with the national Parliament. There is a hope that a breakthrough might be made later in the year. Clearly, these matters sit outside the direct control of the university and the team does not feel in a position to comment further on the political barriers to implementing such change. However, the team has no doubt that the lack of a University Council hampers important aspects of the university's work, for example, in relation to utilising external expertise and furthering connections with the business community. It would also provide an important institutional monitoring mechanism in respect of both the Rectorate and the Senate.
- 2.7 While the university has made some progress in moving towards its ambition to become a more integrated institution, it acknowledges that there is still work to be done to achieve the optimal balance between centralised and decentralised powers. Faculties still retain significant powers and autonomy, and the university's senior leadership is clear that it wants to continue to encourage important elements of bottom-up decision-making. There is no wish to circumvent the core university structures and behaviours that operate well because of the shared trust that has been engendered across all parts of UKLO. However, this is not a naïve view of how organisations work and there is a clear understanding in all quarters that faculties / units can sometimes act as a barrier to change. One area of development that has remained subject to vested interest has been the introduction of joint programmes, where the ownership of programmes by individual faculties often hampers interdisciplinarity. Here the senior leadership role is seen as one of facilitating communication between units but, in the view of the team, this can easily lead to inertia. However, there has been some encouragement in increasing inter-faculty conversations, aided ironically by the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to shift to on-line communication, something that has overcome many of the challenges of physically dispersed campuses. The team encourages the university to maintain its keen interest in optimal decision-making and to *use the*

new governance structures to facilitate consensus building on wider university imperatives and also the breaking down of barriers to change. And, as a corollary to this, the team recommends that the university enhances the organisational culture of critical reflection on the activities carried out by academic staff and students. This is very much an opportunity for all constituencies in UKLO to step back from a parochial view of their work and embrace broader and more dynamic agendas that can be of greater benefit to the institution's development and sustainability. In short, a challenging culture is a healthy one. This approach can be aided by the senior leadership's on-going efforts to formulate arrangements around regional forums that can replicate the benefits of an International Advisory Board, notwithstanding some of formal legal constraints associated with such entities.

- 2.8 Since the last IEP visit, a new Strategic Plan (2018 – 2022), with associated Action Plan, has been developed. The team was provided with a copy of this plan and noted that the strategic planning process that had underpinned the new plan had engaged all parts of the university. The senior leadership has been intent on making the process a more democratic one and the earlier IEP recommendations have helped frame the strategic conversation within units and across the university. The Action Plan is seen as part of the mechanism for 'closing the loop' on progressing the imperatives set out in the new Strategic Plan. There is a clear acknowledgment by the university that the speed of achievement on some strategic plan milestones is disappointing. In part this is attributed to the additional challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, together with a deliberate policy decision to focus on what are regarded as essential aspects of the plan. While the team is sympathetic to the circumstances that have prevailed during 2020 and 2021, it does reiterate the view expressed in the 2017 IEP report that effective strategic planning at UKLO is hampered by a short-term perspective, and consequently, goals and specific targets for the medium to long-term are not well-defined or can be lacking altogether. For example, relatively straightforward opportunities for target setting, at the very least for the medium term, relating to student enrolments, research publications and new joint programmes seem to have been missed. As in 2017 the IEP team is firmly of the view that basic strategic planning principles should be followed to enable the university to meet its core mission and vision. Targets set an important context for that work, even if those targets are very moderate or signal a 'steady state'.
- 2.9 Senior leaders recognise that, in this respect, there are shortcomings in the strategic planning process. Some take the view that it is better to concentrate on what can be regarded as realistic targets rather than project targets into a very uncertain future, particularly when financial resources are only confirmed on a short term basis. Other senior staff see the need to challenge a residual mindset from the communist government period when targets needed to show 100% success. The team found it helpful to understand some of the context for current approaches to strategic planning; however, the team is clear that the university must *continue to review the SMART aspects of the strategic planning process, and, notwithstanding external financial constraints, make further efforts to frame strategy around medium to long term goals and targets.*
- 2.10 One aspect of governance arrangements that has emerged since the last IEP visit is the introduction of a post committed to rooting out any elements of corruption in the work of the university. This appointment flows from national laws on the prevention of corruption, whistleblowing and on higher education. There is, therefore, a clear national dimension to this initiative and it also sits within the context of anti-corruption work being pursued by the Republic

of North Macedonia as part of its bid to secure accession to the EU⁴. The appointment was made by the Senate in February 2020 and in the period since that appointment there has been one report of alleged corruption that has been pursued. However, when fully considered, this allegation was found not to be supported by the evidence submitted. At its request, the team received a short report on the background to the development of this anti-corruption role and it is impressed by the vigour with which the university has been addressing this issue and its determination to educate and guide its student body through the damaging effects of corruption and the importance of tackling such activities in higher education and beyond⁵.

⁴ An EU Commission staff working document on North Macedonia (October 2020) provides some details on the progress in the wider fight against corruption in the country. In the section on education and culture the report comments that 'the education system is vulnerable to political influence and corruption'. See:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf

⁵ Corruption is defined in the University's Rules as 'an intentional action of an official person as mentioned in Act 3 of the Rules, who directly or indirectly asks or receives benefit of any kind for themselves or for third party, or accepts a promise of such benefit in order to refrain from acting in accordance with the obligations or to perform the competencies contrary to official duties, as well as intentional action of a person referred to in Article 3 of these Rules, who directly or through an intermediary, promises or benefits by any kind of official person, for them or for the third party in order to act or refrain from acting in accordance with obligation or to perform their competencies contrary to the official obligations'.

3. Quality culture

- 3.1 In many ways UKLO is still grappling with the task of precisely defining and then implementing the complex matrix of activities that underpins a robust and vibrant quality culture. Importantly, it recognises that it is exposed to a number of weaknesses and threats in this domain and this level of self-awareness is an important foundation for the development of a distinct and sustainable quality culture.
- 3.2 The team met with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders holding responsibilities or an interest in quality assurance and quality enhancement. As with some of its discussions on governance, the team finds the quality debate at UKLO often being framed by national parameters (or the lack of them). Whether from the devolved perspective of the faculties or the wider institutional remit of the senior leadership team, a policy handbrake emanating from central government is felt to hinder the clarification or enhancement of quality processes and practices. In particular, the team was advised that while a national programme accreditation board has been established following the May 2018 Higher Education Act, the formulation of a parallel national board for quality evaluation is still under consideration.
- 3.3 However, in the view of the team, the hiatus surrounding a properly functioning national quality evaluation agency appears to be interfering with the progression of quality initiatives that are perfectly within the internal scope of the university. For example, it is clear that some good progress has been made in developing an institutional Quality Handbook. This progress has been stalled by the absence of some national guidelines. Clearly, this is a matter of some frustration for the university. The team suggests, however, that it would be appropriate to finalise a first draft of the Handbook using, where necessary, core quality principles and concepts⁶ until more detailed guidance is obtained from the national agency. The final version can be adapted when clarification is received from the external body. In some ways the mindset of 'wait and see' in relation to the finalisation of the Quality Handbook, while understandable, needs to be challenged and the team met some university leaders that agreed that current attitudes could be too passive. In terms of the draft Quality Handbook, therefore, the team recommends that it is finalised in the way suggested above and that *a clear deadline is set for the publication of this first edition of the Handbook*.
- 3.4 The team is familiar with the narrative in the SER that Self-Evaluation Committees (SEC) - both on university and faculty levels - are critical to overseeing developments and processes in quality assurance and, to a lesser degree, quality enhancement. Such committees are a requirement of the national higher education law and have been operating in the university for many years. The team understands that there is no immediate plan to move away from the pivotal role played by these SECs but the team also views the current role of SECs as somewhat confining in approach and therefore unlikely to be able to form the basis of a sustainable quality assurance structure going forward. The university does appear to understand that the demands of delivering both basic quality assurance processes in a more complex higher education world and stimulating quality enhancement to keep pace with national and international competitors will require some form of reconfiguration of quality structures. The engineering of such structural changes is made more complicated by a very clear resource deficit, principally at the level of staff appointments

⁶ There is a readily available resource - the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area - to support this work.

but also in the development of IT systems such as iKnow that support the monitoring of quality activities.

- 3.5 The team does not underestimate the challenges facing the university in enhancing its quality structures. However, it is firmly of the view that UKLO needs to *move towards a more professionalised approach to quality governance where established staff can oversee developments and processes in quality assurance and quality enhancement. These arrangements can then provide the policy and process backbone for the work of academic, administrative and support colleagues in university and faculty quality and standards committees.* As an integral part of this recommendation the team advises the university to *establish a Quality Department within the Rectorate that is adequately staffed, and with appropriate seniority, so that it can oversee and support all quality processes.* This Quality Department should be a focal point for supporting improved consistency of quality processes in the faculties, where the team is concerned that ad hoc practices impede internal benchmarking across units and contribute to a variable student experience of quality and standards. In time the team believes that a revised quality structure can offer a solid platform for the development of a more holistic view of quality culture across all aspects of university life, something that would help tie together and embed good practice in learning and teaching, research, and professional services and ensure that quality policy and practice support the strategic imperatives of the university.
- 3.6 As with the 2017 IEP evaluation, the team finds that quality processes at UKLO are strongly geared towards the use of student questionnaires, now conducted in faculties on a twice-yearly basis through the iKnow system. Faculty surveys are scrutinised by the president of the local self-evaluation committee and contribute to the analysis of quality in the faculty self-evaluation report. An institutional picture is built up from the aggregation of data from the various faculty surveys. The surveys are mandatory for students and appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure the anonymity of responses. Students were involved in the questionnaire design in 2015 but they have not been directly involved in the design since that time. There is scope for open (free format) responses from students in the current questionnaire and this opportunity is seen as a quality safety outlet if students wish to raise issues that fall outside the standard methodology of questions. The team suggests that this would now be a timely moment to re-engage students with the on-going design of the questionnaire and that it would be good practice to do so on a regular cycle every 3-4 years.
- 3.7 On the whole faculties and the central university authorities view the results of these surveys in a positive light with student satisfaction across most activities in the upper quartile, although the team notes that responses from second and third cycle students are less positive. However, some students expressed a less sanguine view of the surveys mentioning concerns over the integrity of the safeguards of anonymity (allegations that professors might be able to access individual student responses), a lack of transparency in the follow-up mechanisms when responses had been critical, and a general lack of interest in the surveys, particularly in relation to students in the second and third cycles. While the team commends the systematic measures in place to engage the student voice it does have some concerns over the ways in which levels of student satisfaction are measured through the surveys. The current methodology uses a 1-5 range as the key algorithm underpinning the analysis of satisfaction. Within this spectrum the team understands that answers covering the 3-5 range are seen as reflecting satisfaction. This is a somewhat generous interpretation and there are grounds for reviewing the bottom threshold for satisfaction and moving this from 3 to 4. This would bring it into line with more commonly found norms in higher

education. This might cause some difficulties with time series analysis but it is important that the university adopts rigorous standards in the ways it measures levels of student satisfaction.

3.8 Ultimately, the team wishes to emphasise that surveys are but one tool in the armoury of quality indicators and that there are dangers in an over-reliance on this benchmark⁷. It has been noted earlier in this report that there appears to be a degree of disinterest or perhaps survey fatigue amongst students, particularly in the masters and doctoral constituencies, and the wider agenda for the university must therefore be the promotion of a broader range of quality measures. This should include, *inter alia*, (a) formal appraisal systems for teaching and administrative staff, something that the team found to be under-developed or lacking altogether, (b) a greater emphasis on annual monitoring processes, notwithstanding the move to two yearly self-evaluation reports, and (c) a renewed focus on mechanisms for enabling quality enhancement. The university is clearly well aware of these issues and it may be that the hiatus caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has deflected attention from developments in these areas. However, the team recommends that the university uses the emerging post-pandemic period as an opportunity to thoroughly explore these developments in quality policy and practice and use these as the basis for *promoting a more holistic understanding of quality culture among staff and students of UKLO*.

⁷ There is a section in the SER which perhaps highlights this tendency to rely on the student survey outcomes in a somewhat unbalanced way. It is stated that 'based on the analysis of the results obtained through the student survey related to first cycle study programmes and compared to the survey results presented in the 2017 Report, an increase in the positive views of students on all the questions from the questionnaires is present. According to that, it can be easily concluded that the quality of study programmes, in all parameters, from the point of view of students, is increasing permanently in the last three years'. The team is very much of the view that there needs to be a triangulation between different quality indicators to arrive at such conclusions, particularly given some of the known shortcomings of survey methods.

4. Teaching and learning

- 4.1 Inevitably, the team spent some time in discussions with staff and students reviewing the university's approaches to teaching and learning during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The team notes a clear majority view from staff and student constituencies that the university adapted to the unique circumstances presented by the pandemic in an effective and sympathetic way. In particular, students praised the university's leadership for its willingness to discuss approaches to assessment and a decision to delay physical examinations until the June / July period.
- 4.2 In a meeting with staff involved in delivering and supporting the on-line learning environment, the team was advised that the core ICT infrastructure had held up well to the increased demands placed on it by the more extensive use of e-learning technologies. There had been some benefits also from the emerging e-learning vision noted during the 2017 visit. This had seen the creation of Google on-line accounts for all staff and students and the early exploration of the Google Drive for storing and accessing learning materials. Some professors had embraced the potential of these developments, but it is acknowledged that the central drive for this style of learning was relatively limited. However, some units, such as the Faculty of Economics, had been exploring the potential of on-line learning platforms from a slightly earlier period and, as a result, were well placed to respond to the need for remote learning across all cycles and all students.
- 4.3 At the outset of the pandemic two committees were established to oversee the university's policies and processes in response to the unique circumstances of Covid-19. One was based in the Rectorate and took responsibility for the overall management of the crisis, the other one, chaired by the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, and including representatives from the units, considered pedagogical best practice in the on-line learning environment. In the faculties all professors were obliged to place their courses online, and deans and vice-deans received weekly updates from all programme teams. In the short term there were particular problems with programmes that relied on the use of laboratory facilities but by the start of the 2020/21 academic year there was a greater understanding of how the workplace could be made Covid-19 secure and how practical learning could be resumed. Training courses were developed for both staff and students to help them understand better the on-line learning technologies and additional expert staff was employed to facilitate these courses. The team was able to scrutinise the comprehensive Covid-19 strategy document⁸ that the university developed for the 2020/21 academic year covering core principles and specific areas such as teaching / administrative staff and student training, practical teaching, assessment practices and the defence of dissertations at all three cycles of study. The document also provided guidance on basic protection measures for staff and students.
- 4.4 The team views this reflection on the delivery of teaching and learning in extreme circumstances as a valuable guide to the university's ability to manage change. It also indicates that staff and students were supported in an effective and coherent way when standard approaches were not possible. In particular, the team notes the inclusive approach adopted by the university's leadership, including developing separate questionnaires for academic staff and students to establish their views on the policies and practices that would best support them during the pandemic. This speaks well to the manner in which the new governance arrangements operated in the university during a period of considerable stress. Of course, the team heard some dissenting voices on how this situation was managed. A minority of faculty voices stated that they coped

⁸ UKLO Strategy for the Realisation of the Education Process during Covid-19 Pandemic, September 2020.

through their own efforts and criticised what they perceived to be a lack of help from the Rectorate; and some students expressed concerns that individual professors were not as helpful as they would have liked. However, the team finds a strong consensus amongst staff and students that the university handled the pandemic well. Most agreed that, while it is important to re-establish a solid platform of face-to-face teaching, there are also important lessons for the delivery of teaching and learning that can be taken forward from the pandemic experience. The team concurs with this assessment. There is a real opportunity for professors and university academic leaders to debate the development of the curriculum in terms of on-line teaching and learning, including approaches to assessment, student feedback and lines of communication both in group and individual student settings. The team therefore *recommends that the university engages in a wide-ranging discourse on how to further develop its on-line learning environment, building on the positive benefits of the approaches that have emerged from the Covid-19 experience.*

4.5 The team is confident that, to a very large degree, academic staff across UKLO view students as being at the centre of their endeavours. Formal engagement with students has been aided by developments in governance with students represented on key committees at both central and faculty levels. The team also notes a broadly stated student view that professors invest significant time and energy in supporting their learning, particularly in some of the smaller faculty settings where attempts are made to create an academic family atmosphere. However, it is not clear to the team how far this student-centred approach extends into the actual teaching and learning experience. In this respect the team finds a lack of appreciation and understanding of the concept of student-centred learning (SCL) and, in particular, the role of learning outcomes⁹. This is true at both staff and student levels and, perhaps, this is to be expected given that there appears to be no obvious ownership / championing of SCL on either the central or faculty levels.

4.6 The team viewed a range of programme and course documentation to see how far this is framed and articulated in terms of SCL. In some cases, it found an absence of learning outcomes for particular courses, in others a lack of differentiation in learning outcomes for different levels of study and, generally, a failure to link learning outcomes to assessment tasks. Obviously, this is not a comprehensive picture and there may well be exemplars of good practice in developing and implementing SCL on various university programmes. From the team's meetings with staff and students, however, it is apparent that there is a lack of consistency and understanding relating to the core principles of SCL and this leads to a deficit in practice and also shortcomings in the monitoring of this important dimension of programme development and student achievement. There are many ways in which to explore a context sensitive approach to SCL at UKLO. The team is in no doubt that the university has the foundations to take this forward. In support of this, *it recommends that leadership teams at both the central university and faculty levels, develop constructive plans, including the training of staff, for the embedding of SCL in programme delivery and that appropriate learning outcomes are fully articulated in all three study cycles.* The university's quality system infrastructure, as discussed in Section 3 above, should be able to provide strong support for this initiative and also monitor its implementation when programmes go through the internal accreditation process. In addition, the university might look at additional ways in which to help embed the academic culture around SCL. This might include *consideration of*

⁹ In its broadest terms SCL stipulates that 'education provision and all its aspects are defined by the intended learning outcomes and most suitable learning process, instead of the student's learning being determined by the education provided' (Student-centred learning: approaches to quality assurance (2019), Gover, Loukkola and Peterbauer (EUA publications)).

approaches to academic staff appraisal, based on an annual self-assessment, to support innovation in teaching and learning and quality enhancement. This should form part of HR policy and the HR Rulebook. This type of formal encouragement for teaching excellence is perhaps even more important given the very limited opportunities for replacing academic staff when they retire or leave. In time, it is hoped that there will be opportunities for generational renewal in academic posts but, even when that occurs, it remains important to have appropriate systems in place to support quality enhancement in learning and teaching.

- 4.7 The SER notes that programme development has remained largely stable in the first two study cycles while some growth has occurred in the third cycle. Given the issues relating to the growth of the higher education sector in North Macedonia, the movement of young eligible candidates out of the country and general demographic trends, this largely static position is, in some ways, understandable. The team was also advised that lack of government student funding is an inhibiting factor for recruitment on to masters and doctoral programmes¹⁰. Those students with the potential, and interest, to progress on to postgraduate study are often discouraged by the fact that higher level qualifications are largely ignored in employment salary structures. It is also the case that those hoping to use postgraduate study as a platform for an academic career find opportunities for teaching assistant posts blocked by government funding policy and a dearth of scholarships for post-doctoral study.
- 4.8 This presents a rather gloomy picture for future programme development and, as individual faculties, there is perhaps little incentive to look beyond the very short term and continue ‘fire-fighting’ until the external environment shows some improvement. The team also understands that faculties take the lead in portfolio planning and the associated market research and trend analysis; and that, in some ways, this faculty focus is because there is no central university driver for this activity. At a time when external factors are a powerful force against horizon scanning in new programme development, the team would emphasise the greater importance of directing energies towards programme innovation, especially in the areas of interdisciplinarity and internationalisation. This has to be tackled on both vertical and horizontal levels so that there is greater consistency in the university’s policy on creating and developing study programmes. In this context, *the team recommends a drive towards an institutional strategic agenda for study programme portfolio development.* The team also hopes that this drive can be supported by the boards for cooperation and public trust that operate as consultative bodies, both on central and the faculty levels, although the team recognises that these bodies are currently not functioning to their full potential or in a majority of faculties have still to start operating¹¹.
- 4.9 The student view of their learning environment, as expressed to the team, is, on the whole, a positive one; and this can be supported by some of the responses in the student surveys. There are, of course, some complaints from students about, for example, ICT provision but there is also an understanding that upgrading technology is both expensive and subject to the unexpected changes of fast moving technology innovation. The SER also makes clear that this ICT deficit is acknowledged by the university’s leadership and that a programme of renewal is to be a focus for the immediate future. The team also notes that there had been a push in faculties to use some of

¹⁰ It was stated to the team that the average fee for a masters programme is 1000 Euros, while the range for PhD study is 1500-2000 Euros.

¹¹ The university provided the team with a short summary of the role of these advisory boards that have been established in line with the requirements of the 2018 Higher Education Law. They consist of unit representatives and representatives of the business and non-business communities chosen to reflect the areas of the unit’s study programmes. Five of twelve units at UKLO have already established boards. The remaining boards are awaiting a nomination from the national parliament before they can start operating.

their income (around 400,000 Euros) from student fees to invest in improvements of the learning environment. The SER sets out developments in physical resources and technical capacities since the last visit, most notably in the resolution of acute accommodation problems for two faculties - Information and Communication Technologies and Biotechnical Sciences. The team also understands that the development of a new university laboratory, with use to be shared amongst faculties, has progressed well, with staffing requirements now to be addressed. It was, of course, not possible for the team to physically visit the university's campuses to gain a better feel for these improvements in the learning environment. However, there appears to be a broad consensus amongst students and staff that some tangible progress has been made in the last three years and a reassurance that the Rectorate and the Senate see the importance of continuing investment in the learning infrastructure. If anything, students are more exercised by the need for greater opportunities for practical experience in their studies. This is most pronounced in the first cycle but there are also echoes of this concern at postgraduate level. There is perhaps a need to re-balance some of the curriculum content on programmes towards practice and encourage external stakeholders through the boards for cooperation and public trust to support this shift. *The team recommends, therefore, that the university considers the introduction of new approaches in teaching methodology to ensure an appropriate balance between theory and practice and also to ensure that students are provided with fuller opportunities to gain subject specific practical experience (Summer schools, etc.) during their studies.*

5. Research

5.1 Perhaps more than any aspect of the university's activities, research is buffeted by the external economic factors that have been discussed in earlier parts of this report. Research funding from central government is not available and the university's senior leadership is pessimistic that there will be any change in this situation in the foreseeable future. The team was advised that in the wider national setting the government only sets aside 0.2% of GDP to research and development. Following the May 2018 HE Law, a national committee should have been established to define the rules and criteria for the allocation of funds to research organisations but that step has still to be taken. There has been no formal government monitoring of research outputs since 2015. This means that the research funding orientation of UKLO is geared mostly towards EU, and to a lesser extent NATO projects. At the time of the team's visit it was not clear how universities in North Macedonia might engage with the new Horizon Europe¹² funding programme. However, it is clear that UKLO will face many of the same constraints experienced through the Horizon 2020 framework programme in securing access to these new funds, particularly in Pillar II that requires collaboration with at least two EU member states. Nevertheless, the six clusters¹³ identified in Pillar II of Horizon Europe offer possibilities for drawing on some UKLO research strengths while the various 'brokerage' events associated with Horizon Europe can provide a route into potential partnerships.

5.2 The SER notes that areas of research strength have now been identified at the faculty level. Three faculties - Technical Sciences, Tourism and Hospitality and Security - are considered to have research profiles that can be viewed as 'uniquely a characteristic of UKLO and that make it recognisable in the national higher education area'. Senior leaders commented that the impetus for research excellence can be part of both a 'top-down' and a 'bottom-up' dynamic. However, it is also recognised that central and faculty level research approaches and processes are not fully integrated; and it appears to the team that, at present, faculties are the dominant force in the defining of priority research areas. In the current climate, where collaboration is a *sine qua non* of many research projects, there is some danger in allowing unit silos to dominate the internal UKLO research landscape. It has been noted earlier in this report that taught programme innovation and cooperation is hampered by the lack of an interdisciplinary focus and strategic governance of these processes. The same is true in the research domain and, significantly, it can also inhibit access to external funding. These issues need to be tackled on the institutional level and the team recommends that *renewed efforts are put into the the establishment of subject specific Centres of Excellence within faculties, thus offering greater opportunities for wider collaborative development and cross-disciplinary research. These Centres of Excellence should be formally designated by the university.*

5.3 The shift towards greater research integration and collaboration within the university can also be supported by embracing a more holistic approach to internal research funding mechanisms. The

¹² Horizon Europe is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation in the period 2021-2027 with a budget of €95.5 billion. It aims to tackle climate change, help to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and boost the EU's competitiveness and growth. The programme is designed to facilitate collaboration and strengthen the impact of research and innovation in developing, supporting and implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges. It looks to support the creation and better dispersing of excellent knowledge and technologies. It also aims to create jobs, fully engage the EU's talent pool, boost economic growth, promote industrial competitiveness and optimise investment impact within a strengthened European Research Area. Legal entities from the EU and associated countries can participate.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

¹³ Health; Culture; Creativity and Inclusive Society; Digital, Industry and Space; Climate, energy and Mobility; Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment.

team notes, for example, that an initiative to establish a central Research Fund has been considered in the past but that this has not been carried through, although some faculties had in fact been in favour of the initiative. The team understands that the bringing together of some unit income into a wider university research 'pot' is a sensitive matter for a range of reasons. However, when the external environment is challenging it is often critical to break down reservations and barriers to greater collegiality. The team therefore *recommends that UKLO revisits the idea of establishing a central Research Fund to help drive the research agenda and to provide wider access to research support across all faculties*. Such initiatives will, no doubt, demand improvements in all aspects of the university's research infrastructure, ranging from better corporate access to databases (Scopus, Web of Science, etc.) to an increased percentage of certified laboratories. And it is, of course, recognised that these are expensive investments for the university to undertake.

5.4 Underpinning these efforts, the team believes that there is a need for an increase in professional staff with expertise in the research area. Many universities have dedicated staffing resources acting as knowledge brokers and enablers for research bids and potential partnership arrangements. Such expertise can also provide an element of support for the vice-rector both in his executive role and also in his capacity as chair of the Senate's Research and International Collaboration (RIC) Committee. The RIC Committee already plays an important role in monitoring research outputs, providing analysis and approving foreign contracts before they go to the Rector for final approval. However, the addition of new dedicated expertise can provide a boost to these existing activities and also bring fresh momentum to inter-faculty co-operation, cross subject synergies and the identification of emerging areas of research strength. The team *recommends that UKLO considers establishing a Research support unit on the central level to help drive the research agenda forward*.

5.5 It has been noted earlier in this section that the prognosis for future government funding of research is bleak and that, on the whole, faculties use student fee income to support research activity. This presents obvious problems in efforts to build research capacity in a meaningful way. The team was advised that a central focus for generating additional income for research was technology and knowledge transfer and that there is now a dedicated area in the Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies for taking forward these efforts. It is hoped that this facility will allow for greater understanding of local and regional business needs and a more informed prioritisation of technology and knowledge transfer initiatives across the university. Direct links to industry for mutually beneficial research were said to be limited and restricted to faculties such as Technical Sciences and Information and Communication Technologies together with the Tobacco Institute. The team recognises that there are no simple solutions as to how the university might generate new research income streams. The introduction of a dedicated research support office (5.4 above) can help provide a focus for current initiatives and there might also be a case for boards of co-operation and public trust to take on an enhanced role in such discussions. Initial efforts along these lines might only lead to marginal gains in the short term but *the team encourages the university to consider how it might reinforce its efforts to generate additional research income through technology and knowledge transfer, consultancy, and tailored services to business and local government organisations*. In this respect it is important to move beyond an understandable pragmatism to a more strategic approach that can serve the medium to long term requirements of the university.

5.6 It is apparent from the discussions the team held with research active staff that there is a broad spectrum of views on how the research eco-system works at UKLO. For some, in units such as the Tobacco Institute and the Hydro-biological Institute, research is imperative to the work of the

unit and that is reflected in their roles and the time spent on research. In many faculties, however, there is a teaching overload that restricts the time available for research. The team was told that faculties do have scope for managing the teaching load in ways that can support increased time for research; however, the government moratorium on new academic posts, including vacant positions following retirement, is making this type of agile manipulation of teaching schedules difficult to accomplish. While recognising these systemic problems, some research staff were positive about their opportunities to undertake meaningful research. In part this reflected their appreciation of the relative creative freedom they enjoyed when pursuing their research. Alongside this is a recognition that efficient time management is crucial to good research outputs. For some therefore, the research eco-system is felt to be challenging but manageable. However, most researchers agreed that delivering quality research comes at the expense of their private personal time, that access to high quality journals needs to be improved significantly and that recognition for their efforts - financial or otherwise – is often in short supply. In these circumstances the team believes that it is important for the university to adopt reward systems that recognise research excellence beyond the normal parameters of Scopus and Web of Science. The team *recommends, therefore, that research reward systems should be enhanced so that, at the very least, they target a broader range of publications than just Scopus*. It is also clear that research staff value opportunities to meet together and discuss the broad range of issues facing them as they pursue their individual research projects. The team commends the organisation of an international day of science in UKLO later in 2021 and would encourage the university to consider additional ways in which it might bring together all researchers - new, experienced and PhDs - allowing them to discuss and showcase their work.

- 5.7 In terms of doctoral studies, according to the SER, recruitment is declining and there was a drop of 40% in new PhD enrolments between 2108/19 and 2019/2020. Future trends are not encouraging as second cycle enrolments for the same period have fallen by a similar percentage. The university sees this trend as largely attributable to the increased availability of second and third cycle programmes in the expanding North Macedonian higher education sector. This level of decline is clearly concerning and there is an acknowledgment amongst both senior research leaders and supervisory staff that pressures to recruit, particularly from outside North Macedonia, are putting a strain on entry standards for PhD study. In its Development Strategy 2018-22 the university emphasises its desire to improve the quality of doctoral studies. This, no doubt, includes a range of planned actions; however, these need to be appropriately articulated and, at the level of recruitment, must recognise both (a) the need to be rigorous in interviewing processes for PhD entry and (b) the wider imperative to sustain a critical mass of well qualified candidates without which doctoral studies at UKLO is at risk of atrophying.
- 5.8 The team understands only too well that this interplay between quality and sustainability is a very significant challenge, and it hopes that future strategic planning discussions for the period beyond 2022 will offer UKLO an opportunity to better define the actions that need to be taken to ensure the medium to long term *health* of doctoral studies. This is important not just in terms of new recruitment but to safeguard the academic and collegiate experience of existing PhD students. In this context, the team met with a number of doctoral research students during this visit and is impressed by their commitment to their research and their well-considered views on the experience of being a PhD student at UKLO. As with mainstream academic staff research, doctoral researchers at UKLO face a range of challenges as they pursue their studies; but this does not seem to inhibit their enthusiasm for their research experience and their appreciation of the quality of their supervision, opportunities for developing contacts outside the university, professors supporting access to research databases and, within the national economic context,

the general research infrastructure. It is also refreshing to hear some of these PhD students discuss prospects for employment outside academia with many demonstrating a strong understanding of the transferable skills that can be gained through higher level research. These levels of enthusiasm can, however, easily dissipate if the trends discussed above (5.7) are not addressed in a systematic way.

6. Service to society

- 6.1 The university's presentation of service to society in the SER is a relatively modest one. There is a focus on student volunteering and the work of the Kredo Center in lifelong learning, alumni development and, most recently, the establishment of a psychological counselling service for students. In one of the team's meeting, however, UKLO's relationship with society was amplified by a range of external stakeholders, both from the public and private sectors, and there was a wide consensus amongst attendees that the university plays an important role in boosting the economic and social development of the Bitola region and, in some areas of activity, the country as a whole. Importantly, UKLO is recognised by these stakeholders as a 'positive brand' with all this implies in terms of enhanced graduate employability prospects together with the potential for a range of other societal engagements embracing, for example, knowledge and technology transfer and consultancy services.
- 6.2 Given this positive narrative from external stakeholders, it is a little puzzling that the university has not developed an overarching strategy for its wider connection with society. Contact channels, for example, between labour market representatives and the university are dispersed amongst a range of actors - the Kredo Centre, professors, rector - and it appears to the team, that there is no apparent *strategic glue* to bind such initiatives together. Clearly, there are opportunities to build on this relatively informal base but this can only be done in a really productive way if there is a strategic framework for this activity underpinned by sound analysis and well-developed targets.
- 6.3 There is, of course, a broader governance aspect to the development of the university's relationships with the various organisations that make up wider society. The delay in the establishment of the University Council due to government and parliamentary factors undermines relationships and practical contacts with the whole of the stakeholder community. The implications of this absence at the top of the university's governance structures have been noted earlier in this report (2.6 above) but it is worth reiterating in the context of this chapter on service to society. Equally, the fact that Boards of co-operation and public trust are only partially effective restricts the levels of regular discourse with community partners. The team understands that the university has been pressing central authorities for the outstanding nominations to these Boards to be progressed without further delay. When this situation is resolved the team recommends that the university takes steps to *enhance the role of Boards so that they can be seen as a strategic asset in support of UKLO's wider positioning in society*. The work of these Boards can then be set alongside the on-going activities of the Kredo Centre and, as the UKLO Development Strategy identifies, an increased visibility for the university achieved through the 'University web, the e-magazine, the University radio UKLO FM and the University Bulletin...'¹⁴.
- 6.4 The team notes that local entrepreneurs, in co-operation with some of UKLO's faculties, encourage students to contemplate creating their own businesses. And in the team's conversations with students, it found that there is a spirit of entrepreneurship in elements of the student body. Some, when asked about career ambitions following graduation, highlighted their desire to branch out on their own and set up their own companies. These students were also keen to use their future career platforms as a way to give back to society, including areas such as sustainability and human rights. This is a commendable aspect of the graduate attributes that are being supported by the university's programmes and wider learning environment. The team recognises that this co-operation with local entrepreneurs gives an important practical aspect to

¹⁴ The university radio station, for example, has engaged 30 students to present their own programmes and it also reaches out to local schools through the introduction of children's programmes.

the university's work *but it also recommends that this activity should be monitored and further developed, in particular for faculties around the social sciences and humanities.* Alongside this, the *business accelerator initiative established in the ICT faculty should be developed in such a way that it provides support for all the university's faculties.*

6.5 Currently, the KREDO Centre is one focal point for strengthening co-operation with the university's local communities and it is instrumental in developing a range of formal agreements with business, NGOs and local authorities. Career development for students and supporting lifelong learning opportunities for the wider public, mostly formulated around training / re-training courses, are also important aspects of the work of the Centre. This work also reaches out into the faculties and there are named contacts in the units to facilitate communication and the sharing of information. However, the broad remit of the Centre is belied by its lack of resources¹⁵. The team understands that for 10 years the Centre operated with a single member of staff but that a second member of staff was appointed in 2016. The proposed addition of a third staff member to take forward work on alumni relations is a welcome development as alumni career tracking is very limited; when connections with the external environment are so important it is a clear shortcoming not to be able to draw on a network of supportive graduates who are, or will be, potential conduits for business and industry collaboration. *The team, therefore, recommends that an Alumni network be established as a priority and with a clear timeline for the implementation of a fully functioning software system to support this network.*

¹⁵ <https://uklo.edu.mk/kredo> shows the very wide range of activities of the Centre and there may be an argument for raising the prominence of the Centre in the presentation of the organisational structures of the University. The same might be said for the organisational presentation of the Student Parliament.

7. Internationalisation

- 7.1 The SER states that international co-operation and internationalisation are amongst the university's key strategic priorities. The fact that the rector directly leads and manages this international agenda is a clear sign of the level of commitment that the university attaches to these developments. The SER also provides a rich commentary on the evolution of UKLO's international activity over the last 12 years. Most of this is framed within UKLO's engagement with various EU schemes, particularly Erasmus+. In addition, the university has signed 73 bilateral co-operation agreements with institutions outside North Macedonia. As the SER notes UKLO's recent focus is to move towards intensifying relations with higher education institutions in neighbouring countries and the wider Balkan region. This is reflected in new or renewed agreements with universities in Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Greece. While these most recent partnership arrangements fit well within the regional focus of UKLO's international strategy, it is accepted that the existing list of 73 collaborations is in need of further scrutiny in terms of viability and sustainability. The university is also looking to maintain a short list of memberships of regional networks designed to support university development¹⁶.
- 7.2 These are clearly sensible approaches for the university to adopt. However, actions relating to internationalisation are notably absent from UKLO's current Strategic Action Plan. The team understands that there might have been a reluctance on the part of the university to pursue some aspects of internationalisation during the Covid-19 pandemic; it has, after all, been a time when borders have been closing and national introspection has, in some ways, become a dominant feature of life. There was also an immediate imperative for UKLO to safeguard staff and students involved in various mobility schemes. However, the Action Plan is meant to be a reflection of the 2018-2022 Development Strategy and the team can see no reason for internationalisation not to have been represented when the Action Plan was first drawn up during 2018/19. Those actions could have remained visible during 2020/21 with a caveat that progress would obviously be intermittent or be put on hold while the pandemic continued to disrupt normal university life. The SER states 'institutional internationalisation and the implementation of internationally recognised standards, both represent a comprehensive, pluri-dimensional process that affects all domains of activity, without exception'. This suggests that, at the very least, the Action Plan should include some cross cutting international themes linked to actions on teaching and learning, research and so on. Given this context this is now a timely moment for UKLO to *develop its internationalisation strategy on the university level through open discussions and mutual agreement on internationalisation priorities*. This can then support the identification of some early actions and also help with the wider development of the post-2022 strategic plan. And, for this to be effective, the *team also recommends that UKLO adopts a much more targeted approach to internationalisation with prominence being given to quantitative indicators and an admissions focus on prospective international students*.
- 7.3 At present the team understands that faculties are at the centre of internationalisation activities. This is not surprising given that UKLO's corporate action plan does not provide any impetus for institution endorsed activity. The university has an active International Office and, alongside its operational remit, it works with the Vice-Rector for Research who has a brief for encouraging international collaboration. However, there is a general acknowledgment that policy directions need to be better articulated and the *team recommends that to master the increasingly diverse*

¹⁶ These include the Balkan University Association (BUA), Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), Magna Charta Universitatum, the Association of Economic Universities of South and Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region (ASECU) and the European University Association (EUA).

dimensions of internationalisation the university adopts a more collegiate approach with improved links between units and the central university level. The committee for research and international co-operation offers an obvious forum for focusing these creative efforts and the team recommends that The Vice-Rector for Research and faculty Vice-Deans continue their work together through, for example, the Committee on Research and International Collaboration, to become an even more creative and dynamic force for the way internationalisation develops across the university. One area that the committee might scrutinise is the lack of language proficiency in the English language. In this respect the team notes that there is no strategic approach as to which subjects should be taught in English; and it appears that, at present, only two criteria apply when considering such programme development a) demand from international students b) an individual staff member's decision to teach the subject in English. The team is sure that the committee is capable of bringing better focus and consistency to this aspect of internationalisation.

7.4 In recent years one feature of international policy in higher education has been the internationalisation of the curriculum. However, it is now more common to consider the broader concept of internationalisation at home. This is seen to embrace a wide range of areas - programme curricula, the coming together of 'home' students and international students and staff to enhance formal learning and provide insights into different cultures, the development of internationally-focused research, the opportunity to learn foreign languages and innovative uses for digital technology, more important than ever in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic experience. Fundamentally, internationalisation at home should focus on all students reaping the benefits of higher education in an international context and not just on those who are able to take up opportunities for mobility. This can help students in all three cycles to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to operate successfully in a global economic, political and social environment. Some elements of internationalisation at home are visible at UKLO. However, *the team recommends that a more rounded view is taken of these opportunities and that UKLO assesses ways in which it might develop further its internationalisation at home agenda.*

7.5 The SER provides some details on student and staff mobility in the period from 2016/17. The figures are relatively modest, with the 2018/19 academic year showing 40 UKLO students and 18 staff members registered on outgoing exchange programmes to higher education institutions, while incoming numbers were 12 students and 43 staff (19 for teaching and 24 for traineeships). It is, of course, difficult to estimate an end date for the disruption to mobility schemes being caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the meantime, nurturing the possibilities offered by mobility schemes will be an important task for UKLO. However, the team is pleased to note the following positive commentary in the SER: 'We constantly notify an increased interest of our students for going on mobility, but also a certain improvement in the incoming mobility flows, which implies that our students are getting better informed about the Programme and the possibilities it offers, but also that the attractiveness of UKLO offer and our country as an ERASMUS destination for foreign students is going up'. Students and staff that the team met were, on the whole, knowledgeable about mobility programmes and many were open to taking up such opportunities in the future. There is, however, a less encouraging picture in respect of the international mobility of first cycle students. As noted above the general positivity around mobility schemes needs to be sustained and, in particular, *the team recommends that increased efforts are made to promote the international mobility of first cycle students.*

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 This on-line IEP follow-up visit to St. Kliment Ohridski University provided the team with a well-rounded picture of the work of all elements of the academic staff and staff communities at the university. This was complemented by input from some of UKLO's external stakeholders. The team recognises that this visit took place amidst the on-going exceptional circumstances relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the team is impressed by the levels of activity and the general sense of calm commitment to safeguarding the quality of education and research in these most challenging times. This has been aided by a continuity in the progressive senior leadership of the university together with positive and loyal staff and students who offer an encouraging platform for future development. In particular, the team notes that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of the university and that considerable external pressures on the university affect its ability to change and develop in line with its strategic ambitions. A freedom from external constraints on, for example, an efficient configuration of faculties across UKLO's campuses would support future sustainability.
- 8.2 The UKLO leadership and staff are generally optimistic about the future development of the university, but the level of external constraints requires a highly proactive strategic approach to overcome these challenges. In turn, the IEP team is confident that UKLO, by accepting change as an opportunity and not a threat, and embracing positive change as a core feature of a healthy quality culture, will be able to work towards the fulfilment of its mission under the particular circumstances it faces as a leading higher education player in North Macedonia. Such an approach must be supported by a real commitment to 'working together' for the greater good.
- 8.3 In summary, the IEP team was provided with many examples showing the university's capacity to manage change, a change to be driven by its leadership, competent, talented and enthusiastic staff and students, as well supportive external stakeholders.

9. Summary of the recommendations

- 1 The university continues to reinforce the positive working relationship between the Rectorate and the president of the Senate so that key institutional changes can be developed and agreed upon with maximum flexibility and agility.
- 2 The university builds on the current progress in embracing the student voice and makes sure that students' involvement in governance becomes securely embedded in the working of the university at both strategic and operational levels.
- 3 Provide training to students to increase their awareness and understanding of their role as one of the driving forces of UKLO's overall development.
- 4 Use the new governance structures to facilitate consensus building on wider university imperatives and also the breaking down of barriers to change.
- 5 Enhance the organisational culture of critical reflection on the activities carried out by academic staff and students.
- 6 Continue to review the SMART aspects of the strategic planning process, and, notwithstanding external financial constraints, make further efforts to frame strategy around medium to long term goals and targets.
- 7 Set a clear deadline for the publication of the first edition of the Quality Handbook.
- 8 Move towards a more professionalised approach to quality governance where established staff can oversee developments and processes in quality assurance and quality enhancement. These arrangements can then provide the policy and process backbone for the work of academic, administrative and support colleagues in university and faculty quality and standards committees.
- 9 Establish a Quality Department within the Rectorate that is adequately staffed, and with appropriate seniority, so that it can oversee and support all quality processes.
- 10 Develop and promote a more holistic view of quality culture amongst the staff and students of UKLO and embed this across all aspects of university life.
- 11 Engage in a wide-ranging discourse on how to further develop its on-line learning environment, building on the positive benefits of the approaches that have emerged from the Covid-19 experience.
- 12 Leadership teams at both the central university and faculty levels should develop constructive plans, including the training of staff, for the embedding of student-centred learning in programme delivery and that appropriate learning outcomes are fully articulated in all three study cycles.

- 13 Consider approaches to academic staff appraisal, based on an annual self-assessment, to support innovation in teaching and learning and quality enhancement. This should form part of HR policy and the HR Rulebook.
- 14 Drive an institutional strategic agenda of Study Programme portfolio development.
- 15 Consider the introduction of new approaches in teaching methodology to ensure an appropriate balance between theory and practice and also to ensure that students are provided with fuller opportunities to gain subject specific practical experience (Summer schools, etc.) during their studies.
- 16 Renew the efforts to establish subject specific Centres of Excellence within faculties, thus offering greater opportunities for wider collaborative development and cross-disciplinary research. These Centres of Excellence should be formally designated by the university.
- 17 Revisit the idea of establishing a central Research Fund to help drive the research agenda and to provide wider access to research support across all faculties.
- 18 Consider establishing a Research support unit on the central level to help drive the research agenda forward.
- 19 Consider how it might reinforce its efforts to generate additional research income through technology and knowledge transfer, consultancy, and tailored services to business and local government organisations.
- 20 Research reward systems should be enhanced so that, at the very least, they target a broader range of publications than just Scopus.
- 21 Enhance the role of Boards of public collaboration and trust so that they can be seen as a strategic asset in support of UKLO's wider positioning in society.
- 22 Cooperation with local entrepreneurs should be monitored and further developed, in particular for faculties around the social sciences and humanities.
- 23 The business accelerator initiative established in the ICT faculty should be developed in such a way that it provides support for all the university's faculties.
- 24 An Alumni network be established as a priority and with a clear timeline for the implementation of a fully functioning software system to support this network.
- 25 Develop the internationalisation strategy on the university level through open discussions and mutual agreement on internationalisation priorities.
- 26 UKLO adopts a much more targeted approach to internationalisation with prominence being given to quantitative indicators and an admissions focus on prospective international students.

- 27 To master the increasingly diverse dimensions of internationalisation the university adopts a more collegiate approach with improved links between units and the central university level.
- 28 The Vice-Rector for Research and faculty Vice-Deans continue their work together through, for example, the Committee on Research and International Collaboration, to become an even more creative and dynamic force for the way internationalisation develops across the university.
- 29 A more rounded view is taken of the opportunities for internationalisation at home and that UKLO assesses ways in which it might develop further its internationalisation at home agenda.
- 30 Increased efforts are made to promote the international mobility of first cycle students.