

ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI UNIVERSITY, BITOLA
EVALUATION REPORT

December 2017

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of St. Kliment Ohridski University, Bitola. 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 Macedonia¹ 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.

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?

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

- 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 profile

- 1.2.1 St. Kliment Ohridski University was founded in 1979 and is one of five public universities² in the Republic of Macedonia. Higher education provision in the country is also augmented by a number of private universities and private schools of higher professional education. The tradition of St. Kliment Ohridski University (the university) largely dates back to the establishment of a range of higher education institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. The oldest units in the university, however, can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s and involve the creation of scientific research centres in the fields of Tobacco and Hydro-Biology.
- 1.2.2 At the time of this evaluation the university had an academic organisational structure of 12 academic units: ten faculties, one higher vocational school and one scientific institute. There were also five institutions with associate (accompanying) status.
- 1.2.3 The university regards itself as a 'comprehensive' institution with faculties specialising in veterinary medicine, health care, economics, education, law, technical sciences, technology, security, biotechnical sciences, information and communication technologies and tourism and hospitality. The university's portfolio of programmes includes coverage at all three levels: first cycle, second cycle and third cycle. The self-evaluation report (SER) states that in the academic year 2016/17 student numbers across all cycles were 7047. There has been a steady decline in student numbers in recent years, down from 2012/13 when the total number of enrolments was 8817.
- 1.2.4 The delivery of education is largely concentrated in Bitola. However, other regional centres such as Prelip, Ohrid, Veles, Skopje and Kichevo are also faculty hubs. The university acknowledges that this multi-site structure presents various challenges, including ensuring consistency in the student experience. There is a strong desire at the university to emphasise its regional and local character, together with an ambition to expand the international reach of the institution, particularly in the wider Balkan region.
- 1.2.5 One of the key developmental objectives for the university is to consolidate its operation as an 'integrated' institution. This concept flows most obviously from the desire to provide cohesion and coherence given its geographical fragmentation; just as importantly, however, it seeks to provide a clear institutional strategy and

² In addition, there is one semi-public university.

direction that thrives alongside the existence of relatively autonomous faculties (and other academic units) with a view to ensuring that the total achievement of the university is greater than simply the sum of its parts.

- 1.2.6 The university sector in the Republic of Macedonia has been coping with a difficult external environment. At the time of first visit there was an absence of stable government, while the legislative framework for higher education tends towards prescription rather than the facilitation of autonomous activity by universities³. More particularly, universities have to contend with a demographic decline in those graduating from high school and increasing emigration by young people because of the weakness of national economy and the lack of opportunities in employment. This has resulted in tougher competition amongst universities for a smaller pool of high calibre entrants. The impact of a weak national economy also contributes to a lack of infrastructure investment (buildings and equipment) in universities, no national funding for research, and limited opportunities for international staff and student mobility.

1.3 The evaluation process

- 1.3.1 The self-evaluation process at the St. Kliment Ohridski University was overseen by a self-evaluation committee (SEC) comprising the following members:

Professor Dr Marija Malenkovska Todorova, Chair
Professor Dr Izabela Filov, Secretary
Professor Dr Cane Mojanoski
Professor Dr Dean Iliev
Associate Professor Dr Anastas Dzurovski
Assistant Professor Dr Ilija Hristoski
Assistant Professor Dr Nikola Rendeski
Elena Koseska, student
Lora Kostovska, student

- 1.3.2 The self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2017. The two visits of the evaluation team to the university took place on 10-11 May 2017 and 17-19 October 2017, respectively. In between the visits, the university provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

³ In the SER, the university records a series of threats that relate to the external environment, including 'numerous alterations of the higher education legislation that cause discontinuity in the functioning of the University and realization of its developmental objectives'.

- 1.3.3 In discussion with the SEC, and other staff across the university, the team was informed that the IEP process was seen as a valuable exercise, especially the discipline of carrying out a SWOT analysis at institutional level. This had drawn on, and synthesised, responses from faculties and other academic units. Within the SEC there had been a demarcation of tasks with some members working closely with faculties/units, some on data analysis and others on the discussion of results. The process was also felt to have aided transparency within the university with faculties scrutinising each other's data in ways that had not been common in the past. The team was advised that this had contributed to making the process more acceptable amongst the academic community. The SEC commented that validating the accuracy of data supplied by faculties and some variability in communication with faculties/units had presented challenges but the process had contributed to the establishment of some agreed data norms and highlighted the benefits of web-based solutions for self-evaluation. The team was told that, on the whole, local faculty SECs had developed a good understanding of the process and their responsibilities and shown themselves ready to discuss issues actively and openly. Student involvement on the SEC was said to have been positive and there had been student participation in the formulation of the student survey presented in the SER. The university felt that the response rate to the student survey had been reasonable given it was only open for a week. The team heard from the SEC that there had been some resentment amongst some professors on student feedback on quality of teaching, even though data was aggregated. The university had decided to highlight the importance of this student survey by presenting the results in a series of tables and charts as an annex to the SER.
- 1.3.4 The team was impressed by the university's approach to the IEP process. The SER had provided them with a succinct narrative of the key activities of the university and the way in which it was organised and worked; and the team's meeting with the SEC had clarified a number of aspects about the wider staff and student engagement with the process and provided strong evidence of a collegial atmosphere underpinning the production of the SER. The team was especially pleased to hear that the self-evaluation exercise was regarded as a dynamic process that was contributing to wider on-going discussions on the future development strategy of the university.
- 1.3.5 The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:
- Professor Tatjana Volkova, former Rector, BA School of Business and Finance, Latvia, team chair
 - Professor Carmen Fenoll, former Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, Quality Assurance and Bologna Issues, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain
 - Professor Thierry Chevaillier, former Vice-President for Resources, University of Burgundy, France
 - Ms Alexandra Raymakers, student, University of Oslo, Norway

- Dr Raymond Smith, former Academic Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator

1.3.6 The team thanks the Rector, Professor Sasho Korunovski, for his warm engagement with the IEP process and his kind hospitality to the team during their two visits to St. Kliment Ohridski University. The team would also like to thank Professor Marija Malenkovska Todorova and her colleagues for the exemplary arrangements that were put in place to make the evaluation a smooth and efficient undertaking.

Finally, the team would like to express its gratitude to all participants in this IEP evaluation for their openness and willingness to discuss issues concerning the university.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

- 2.1 The key deliberative and decision-making organs of the university are the Senate and the Rector's Board. The rector, who is the most senior leader and manager in the university, chairs the Senate and also directly manages the four vice-rectors and the secretary-general. The Senate is supported in its role by a number of committees. In accordance with a new Statute, the existing Academic and Research Committee is to be reorganised into two separate committees, one dealing with academic issues and quality assurance and the other with research. Additionally, the Inter-university and international cooperation committee will be renamed as the Internationalisation Committee, better reflecting its remit and the current trends in this area. All committees have reporting lines to the Senate. The Rector's Board comprises the rectorate and the most senior managers in faculties and other units (deans/directors). It also has one student member.
- 2.2 In the university's SER there is reference to a University Council designed to provide a degree of strategic oversight of the institution - confirming compliance with the law and monitoring the effective and efficient utilisation of physical and human resources - with a composition to be drawn from both internal and external candidates. However, the team was advised that the operation of this Council, which is required by national law, had been on hold for some time as the university was still awaiting confirmatory government decisions on proposed external candidates⁴. The team understood from the university that recent political changes in the government were likely to lead to revised criteria for the nomination of external candidates to this Council; there was some hope that this might be clarified early in 2018.
- 2.3 For the most part, the team found these overarching organisational, deliberative and decision-making arrangements sound and appropriately based on principles of collegiality and transparency. It noted that, in general, deans found the balance of power between faculties and the central level a reasonable one and they were realistic enough to know that faculties could not sustain themselves as separate entities. From the wider staff perspective, the team was told that relationships at the university level were conducted mainly through staff representatives on the Senate. Academic staff also saw their dean's membership of the Rector's Board as an important conduit for their views; and this was reinforced by the input of the vice-deans on the various university committees. Within the faculties, Faculty Councils were said to meet once or twice a month.
- 2.4 Despite this positive outlook for governance and management, the team was concerned that, notwithstanding the context, an important oversight element - the University Council - was not contributing to the effective governance of the university. Currently, some consideration was being given at senior levels to

⁴ This perhaps explains the absence of the University Council from the organogram at Annex 1 of the SER.

allocating a more significant role in financial matters to the Senate. However, in the view of the team this could not match the experience of external figures who were in a good position to ensure rigour in institutional financial management and also provide valuable contributions to the strategic development of the university from their areas of expertise.

- 2.5 The student role in governance is through membership of the Senate, the Rector's Board and the university committee structure. Central level representation is mirrored in faculty arrangements. Senior management acknowledged, however, that the student focus of the university needed to improve. A vice-rector for student affairs works with faculties to drive improvement but, in the view of the university leadership, faculty management boards had to take responsibility for the delivery of a positive student experience. From this perspective, the central authorities can set trends but delivery was a clear devolved responsibility. The team heard, however, that student representation at the central university level had recently become inactive. In part this was said to be because of external national student body factors; it was also a consequence of the failure by the previous year's officers of the Student Parliament to conduct elections for new officers. The team met a number of students who accepted that there was a degree of apathy in communicating the student voice with little interest in the university Student Parliament. They also felt that this apathy needed to be addressed.
- 2.6 This vacuum in student engagement at central level was only partly filled by activity at the faculty level, which was not affected to the same degree by these factors. The rectorate viewed this as a very unhelpful set of circumstances and noted that there had been disagreements in the past about the extent of student involvement in the running of the university. There was some hope that a shift in the external environment, probably through a new higher education law, would encourage progress within the university's student body. The team understood that there might be current barriers to formal student representation at university level; however, it also felt that more could, and should, be done to re-establish channels of communication, even if these were informal in nature. *The team therefore recommends executive action through the rectorate to support the re-establishment of a meaningful student voice at university level as soon as possible.*
- 2.7 In the SER, the university sets out its *universal* mission as 'generating knowledge and science, as well as generating and safeguarding the cultural values of the society'. The university's *primary* mission is said to be 'offering quality education [to] young professionals and producing qualified, accomplished experts, competitive on both the national and international labour markets'. A vision has been developed around eight general strands including academic freedom, transparency, European standards and the quality and recognition of study programmes. The vision is framed within the context of St Kliment Ohridski as an 'integrated' university.

- 2.8 The team was informed that the statements of mission and vision set out in the SER, together with an overall strategic development plan for the university, were now being reviewed as part of a comprehensive university consultation. A draft development strategy for the period 2017-2022, including some revisions to mission and vision, had been worked on by key members of the rectorate and that document was now with the university academic community for comment. Senior university leaders also commented that the production of the IEP SER had been a useful catalyst for reflecting on the need for change. This had led to a process of reviewing the fitness for purpose of the various university Statutes (which form the basis for every day working); and it was the intention to improve those Statutes over and above the requirements of national legislation. The team found this to be a good example of collegiate working within the university as the revision process involved the Rector meeting with all faculties and reassuring them of the transparency of the exercise and that there were no 'hidden agendas'. The end point was clearly identified as the common ownership of key internal regulations and processes.
- 2.9 The team welcomed these initiatives as its immediate view, following consideration of the SER, had been that the university's stated mission was over-ambitious and lacking in a focus that resonated with the specific *raison d'être* of the university. In this sense values had not been well defined or articulated. For example, they might helpfully include a fuller and more precise expression of regional and international values. Given that mission and vision are defining features for any university, the team urged the university's senior leadership to use the current consultation as a means of *continuing reflection on those twin pillars of identity and to ensure that, when finalised, they are based on well-articulated and shared values.*
- 2.10 Historically, there also appeared to have been a lack of effective strategic planning in the university, especially for the medium to long term. This might, in part, be explained by the year on year core funding allocation mechanism that operates for public universities in the Republic of Macedonia. As a result, the university seemed over-reliant on a short-term action-based approach to development with actions often detached from clearly defined strategic goals.
- 2.11 In the view of the team, this approach was inhibiting the progress of ideas and creative solutions. Those initiatives had been well-articulated in the discussions that took place between the team and the senior managers of the university. Certainly from the perspective of the rectorate, the team understood that there were a number of key strands to the university's future progress. These included (1) the creation of a modern university capable of competing in the national and wider regional higher education marketplace; (2) being active and recognised in the international arena, ensuring that agreements were effective and demonstrated clear benefits; (3) the strengthening of the university as a single entity while maintaining the benefits of its decentralised model. This might involve introducing a greater sense

of challenge to individual faculty proposals both from other faculties and the centre. Strategy was therefore seen as a tool of integration and a support for faculty development; (4) improved approaches to attracting both home and international students with a focus on international recruitment to the second and third cycles.

- 2.12 The draft development strategy and its associated action plan were provided to the team in advance of its second visit in October 2017 and the team found many aspects of positive progress in this documentation. One key element of the new strategy emerged around the quality assurance and enhancement of education and research. To counter the view held in some quarters that quality processes were simply a bureaucratic hurdle, the university was looking to develop clearer processes and also engineer a shift towards enhancement. The draft action plan was seen by the rectorate as an important way of stimulating change in a difficult external environment; and this explained the current focus on operational and tactical goals. The team noted, however, that the action plan lacked specifics, with dates, priorities, and monitoring mechanisms missing or underdeveloped. More broadly, future strategic direction in relation to organisational structure, the optimum number of faculties, student numbers, and the nature of international engagement needed greater clarity. In the view of the team there was an urgent need to guide actions through agreed strategic directions of development.
- 2.13 The current strategic planning process was, however, providing a timely and important dynamic in support of the university's future development. The team saw ample evidence of management and staff commitment to the process and a strong impetus to finalise the plan by the end of 2017. However, the team did detect some ambiguities of approach and inconsistencies in the theoretical underpinning of the exercise. The team was therefore keen to stress to the university leadership that the *strategic development at St. Kliment Ohridski should focus on SMART⁵ goals and associated indicators balanced around key strategic approaches*. The associated *action plan should be streamlined around the revised mission and vision and strategic goals*.
- 2.14 At this juncture, given the weight of internal and external challenges, the team also believed that there might be some benefit from establishing an independent and regular source of external advice and benchmarking to support the future development of the university. This might be achieved in a number of ways; *the team suggests that the establishment of an International Advisory Board could be an effective vehicle for harnessing an appropriate balance of external experience and expertise to the on-going benefit of the university*.

⁵ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound

3. Quality culture

- 3.1 In the university's SER a number of connections are made between levels of the organisation and stakeholders - management, staff, students, external partners - and the quality assurance system. These are often expressed as processes or as matters of compliance, for example adherence to rulebooks. The organisational and management structures of the university are seen as facilitating quality processes through the operation of the Senate, Rector's Board, and comparable arrangements in faculties and other academic units. The team was informed that the Vice-Rectors for Academic Affairs, Research and Student Affairs work closely together and play prominent roles in guiding policy initiatives in quality systems; while in faculty structures one vice-dean is normally responsible for overseeing the implementation of quality processes, especially relating to assessment. These roles provide for an on-going quality dialogue between the central level and the faculties. Underpinning the quality processes of the university are two key set piece activities: first an institutional self-evaluation exercise, as required by national law, carried out on a three year cycle and, second, an annual student survey conducted in each of the academic units of the university.
- 3.2 While endorsing these basic building blocks of a quality assurance system, the team also noted an honest appraisal by the university in its SWOT analysis, of 'insufficient functionality and implementation of the quality system'. Other areas of weakness in developing holistic quality arrangements, such as the functionality and reach of the iKnow management information system, are also acknowledged in the SER. As previously mentioned (see paragraph 2.12 above), it is the intention of the university's senior leadership to use the strategic planning process as a way of focusing attention on the development and embedding of a more rigorous quality culture and one that embraces all aspects of the work of the university. The team noted that there is a section in the draft development strategy (and action plan) on 'Quality Culture'. However, the suggested strategic goals in this area are formulated in language that lacks precision and are therefore difficult to translate into specific actions. Thus, the university talks of achieving the 'highest possible degree of quality in higher education, scientific-research...'. Similar language is used in relation to the functioning of the central administrative areas of the university. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the section in the draft action plan on quality culture leans heavily on raising awareness of quality policy and practice amongst academic and professional staff and also students.
- 3.3 Clearly this level of general ambition and internal stakeholder encouragement and engagement has its part to play in progressing a quality culture. And it is, of course, the case that the draft development strategy embraces quality improvement and enhancement ambitions in, for example, the areas of teaching and learning and

science and research. There is a natural interplay between these elements and the larger umbrella that is quality culture. The team, therefore, found clear evidence of a desire to develop and improve quality culture. What the team found missing, however, was a university-wide understanding of quality concepts. This was the glue that should hold together the various policies and practices operating in the university. Thus, while the university was working hard to update and improve its various rulebooks relating to quality assurance, in the view of the team this could not be an optimal exercise unless there was a common conceptual understanding of the broader quality factors at play, the nature of their interaction and how strategic quality outcomes could be delivered. In discussions with the team, staff often referred to one output measure as an indicator of the quality of education at the university, for example they saw the demand for St. Kliment Ohridski graduates on completion of their courses as proof of the success of quality arrangements. No doubt this correlation was part of the story, but the team was looking for a broader framework for making such judgements. For example, one element of this conceptual framework might be the student journey - admission, progression, achievement and graduate attributes; the quality systems that were in place and how they identified excellence might be seen as a second element; and a third element might relate to the core identity of the university (mission and vision) and how far this was being reflected in the outcomes for education, research and other activities. The team therefore *recommends that all levels of the university are supported in developing a better understanding of a quality concept, its meaning and the latest methodologies that can be utilised to help produce positive quality outcomes.*

- 3.4 In terms of quality management systems, the university has pursued ISO 9001:2015 in relation to central professional and administrative areas of activity. The university believes that this approach, together with rules for the ethical behaviour of staff and students, can be instrumental in strengthening 'the institutional capacities for quality assurance and control'. To a degree, the team could see the reasoning behind this approach which is designed to focus on consistency in providing products and services that meet customer needs and internal/external statutory and regulatory requirements. After all there is, as previously noted, an extensive raft of legal and statutory requirements that apply to universities in the Republic of Macedonia. However, even in higher education systems that emphasise a market-oriented approach to university education (the student as 'customer'), there is an understanding that the 'products and services' on offer are of a very different nature to those found in, for example, a manufacturing environment. It is also clearly the case that ISO standards are not easily transferable to the academic domain; and, indeed, the team noted that the university did not intend to try and do so. There are therefore difficulties in operating with divergent quality philosophies and practices in an academic institution, not least because there is an important interplay between professional/administrative staff and their academic colleagues in supporting the teaching, learning and research infrastructure and related quality support

mechanisms. The quality management system needs to be one with a shared language and understanding and approaches that can for all the different internal stakeholders. The team welcomed the plan for an internal conference for all academic staff focusing on improving quality and explaining the methodologies applied, an initiative that had emerged from the self-evaluation process. In future, the team suggested, there could be some benefit from including representatives or experts from other universities or even hosting a wider regional university conference on quality management/assurance/enhancement. It was also important to engage with relevant professional and administrative staff in this conversation so that the ownership of quality was embedded across all parts of the university. *The team therefore urges the university's senior leadership to reflect on the type of quality management system it should put in place to meet the university's needs as a whole.*

- 3.5 The importance and value that the university attaches to student feedback as an indicator of quality was a common feature of many of the discussions that the team held with staff and students. As previously noted, the results of a comprehensive student survey, conducted under the auspices of the self-evaluation committee, are included as a substantial annex to the SER. The survey covers the quality of study programmes at all three levels, academic staff activity (performance of professors) and the quality of staff supporting mainstream teaching activity. The team noted that there were many positive indicators emanating from the survey and these are referred to in the appropriate sections of the SER. The university has also pinpointed a range of areas that require further attention such as inconsistency across academic units in the 'objectivity of assessment' and also in the failure to apply 'modern teaching methodologies' across all programmes. In many ways these weaknesses speak to a lack of effectiveness in some aspects of the university's quality systems as guardians of both assurance and enhancement.
- 3.6 In addition to the student survey delivered as part of the self-assessment cycle, the team noted that student surveys for annual monitoring purposes are undertaken by the various faculty units. These take place at the end of the academic year and the results are published on the university's internal website. Faculties were said to be generally happy with the outcomes. The team appreciated that these surveys generated a significant data set and it was clear that analysis took place to identify strengths and weakness in the key aspects of the student learning experience. However, it was not entirely evident to the team that these conclusions were being followed up systematically through the core quality systems. The student voice now has an accepted place in helping to assure and enhance the quality of academic programmes and the wider student learning environment. There is, however, a danger that the act of listening becomes an end in itself, and that tried and trusted methods are repeated without achieving the desired impact. There were a number of areas of the process that the team felt merited attention. For example, had the purpose of the surveys been considered in the context of the overall quality systems;

how was the content of the surveys determined and were there any questions that were being overlooked - in the view of the team there was a very strong case for seeking student views on how far they felt the teaching and assessment on their programme helped them in meeting learning outcomes; was a yearly survey at the level of the unit sufficient - surveys at the end of each semester might offer greater scope for understanding and addressing any issues at an earlier opportunity; and finally was there sufficient robustness in responding to concerns that were being raised. *The team recommends, therefore, that the university reflects on the purpose of student surveys, including the appropriateness of content, their frequency and timing and the effectiveness of follow-up actions (closing the feedback loop).*

- 3.7 The university is open in its acknowledgment that internal quality assurance systems are still in the process of being developed fully and, in some areas, suffer from shortcomings in implementation. The team also felt that while the emphasis on student surveys was understandable as an important measure of quality there was a risk that other performance assessment measures - such as feedback from employers/external stakeholders, peer observation of teaching, evaluation of the learning infrastructure - might be underplayed or overlooked. This was a dynamic process and one that needed to bring together a wide range of indicators. *The team therefore asks the university to ensure that a range of performance assessment mechanisms are put in place to support quality assurance and quality enhancement.*
- 3.8 No doubt some of these gaps in approach and processes will be addressed through the updating of rulebooks, the expert scrutiny of the university's deliberative committees and a strong lead by senior management both centrally and in faculties. However, as with other areas of activity, quality system development requires resources and the team believes that the professional staff support for quality processes needs some reinforcement. At the moment there is only one Quality Officer and, given the university's statement that 'investing in the quality assurance system is a long-term strategic plan of the University', there is a strong argument for an increase in professional support staff in this area and even the establishment of a dedicated Quality Office within the rectorate. Equally, if quality systems are to be understood and acted upon by all sections of the university then, in the view of the team, processes, responsibilities and intended outcomes had to be communicated in a more accessible way. The university's rulebooks provide a set of requirements relating to quality but often fail to provide a clear sense of concept, context or how a sequence of inter-connected activities work in practice. In many higher education institutions it is common practice to *produce a Quality Handbook, in addition to the more formal rulebooks or regulations, and the team recommends that the university adopts this approach to support the development, embedding and implementation of its quality system.*

4. Teaching and learning

- 4.1 The university's draft development strategy sets out a number of challenges facing the university in the area of teaching and learning. In broad terms these challenges are characterised as the need 'to offer and develop such competencies of students and academic staff which can go along [with] the social and economic changes, while improving the professional integration of students'. The university's building blocks in advancing teaching and learning are described in the SER as design and approval of programmes; student centred learning and assessment; physical resources and technical capacities; and the information and academic support for students while pursuing their studies.
- 4.2 The team was informed that existing programmes had recently been re-accredited as part of a five-year cyclical process. While this re-accreditation process included a requirement to gather evidence of the competitiveness of the programme, the team heard that in some areas, government policy would not allow programmes to be closed/opened even though demand for places was low/high. There was also a view expressed by senior managers that while the university was seeking to address regional higher education needs, for example through the enhancement of the Higher Medical School to faculty status, government policy could often be a barrier to a more open, market-driven approach. Ultimately the Ministry of Education would determine which faculties opened and closed and where provision should be located. The team noted, for example, that the Faculty of Law had its main location in Kichevo with a branch in Bitola. This arrangement was not optimal in terms of recruitment as demand in Kichevo was limited. Yet there were limitations on the autonomy of the university to effect a full relocation of the faculty to Bitola where demand would be higher and development opportunities greater. The team felt that this was a significant constraint on the decision-making powers of the university.
- 4.3 The internationalisation of programmes had been emphasised in the re- accreditation process with a greater focus on the European dimension in the curriculum. In addition, four double diplomas at undergraduate level and four at postgraduate level had been introduced into the university's portfolio. The team was told that co-operation between faculties on programme development and programme synergies was not well established. There were a small number of joint programmes delivered between faculties and some consideration was being given to introducing more inter-disciplinary programmes. However, faculty collaboration often resulted from students choosing electives outside their home faculty rather than any conscious faculty management planning. The team thought that this was one of the areas where the impetus towards consolidating the 'integrated' university might bear fruit.
- 4.4 The team noted that there were relatively few programmes taught in English and the university acknowledged that this position needed to change if it was to attract greater numbers of international students. Indeed, the scope for increasing English

language programmes had been the subject of recent discussion in the rectorate and there were plans to double the number of such programmes over the next two years. New programmes would cover subject areas such as economics, traffic and transport and tourism although these proposals would, of course, require approval from the Ministry of Education and the national Board of Accreditation. In response to concerns raised by the team about the university's capacity to manage such an increase in specialist provision in a relatively short period of time, senior managers emphasised that they had given considerable thought to the investment implications of this decision (including that of staff time and staff development) and these aspects had been carefully factored into the development strategy for the academic portfolio.

- 4.5 The SER provides a detailed summary of the university's approach to programme approval and the team was able to scrutinise examples of programme documentation for both undergraduate and postgraduate provision. This documentation was found to be extremely comprehensive and included details of assessment tasks and learning outcomes. The team also looked at the related rulebooks on quality assurance to see how the process was managed. The team concluded that the core quality assurance mechanisms operated effectively in this regard. As previously noted, however, the introduction of a Quality Handbook (see paragraph 3.7 above) would provide an additional element of context and explication for those involved in these processes.
- 4.6 The university explained to the team that while it would continue to compete actively for new students, it had, in fact, no expectation of any significant expansion in student numbers in the foreseeable future. In the context of teaching and learning, the team was told that management efforts could, therefore, be concentrated on the quality of the learning experience. However, there was an immediate and important consideration which related to the current recruitment levels and the fact that in 2015/16 significant numbers of first cycle students - in the region of 50% - failed their final examination⁶. The university explained this very high level of failure by reference to the fact that 97% of high school graduates continue to university in the Republic of Macedonia. This lack of selectivity at the point of entry meant that many new students had not given proper consideration to the demands of a university education or were ill-equipped to cope with the pedagogic and curriculum demands of their programme. As a result, many left quite early in their first year; in some cases students left after the first year to move abroad. This was not a problem confined to the first cycle. At graduate level there was an increasing trend for

⁶ The SER indicates in table 16 that for first cycle students who completed the final exam in 2015/16 only 49.64 % passed.

students to prolong their studies, and in 2015/16, 729 students are shown as having been on their programme for five years or more. This compares to an equivalent figure in 2014/15 of 354. These low completion rates were confirmed in conversations that the team had with postgraduate students and were mostly attributed to work pressures. In terms of the health of postgraduate education at the university, this situation was compounded by many students going abroad to pursue their Masters' education.

- 4.7 The team was aware that some of the significant factors affecting high drop-out rates at undergraduate level were outside the direct control of the university. However, there was some danger that these statistics on student drop-outs might become normalised. In the view of the team it was important that the university regarded this as a quality matter and one that demanded regular scrutiny, analysis and action. St. Kliment Ohridski was far from being alone in encountering the challenges of high student drop-out and there were many examples in the sector of innovation in tackling some of the underlying causes. Indeed the team found some evidence of faculties undertaking outreach work with high schools to help with the transition from the directed learning school pupils were familiar with to the more independent style of learning expected of students at university. The team also advised that there were examples of creativity in programme design that could support those who struggled with the conceptual and subject demands in the first year of their undergraduate studies. One possibility was to introduce a foundation or preliminary year that could act as a more solid platform for future achievement by students who lacked some of the key study skills and confidence in subject material following their graduation from high school. The team therefore *recommends that the university consider different approaches to addressing the existing high drop-out rates, including creativity in programme design and structure.*
- 4.8 From both the perspective of the university and undergraduate students the alignment of theory and practice was of fundamental importance in the design of study programmes. Indeed, practical training (internship) is a compulsory element and embedded into every study programme in each year of the first cycle. These internships take place for 30 days at the end of summer semester. Faculties have signed agreements with companies and local and national government institutions for these internships and passing the internship is a programme progression requirement. However, in discussions with the team, some students suggested that there was a need for greater continuity of practical work during the year. They mentioned that practical work experience opportunities could be found outside the Republic of Macedonia but there was a limited take up of these opportunities. The team understood that most of the university's students lived at home and were reluctant to move away from this family environment. Students also expressed concern over higher living costs outside the country.

- 4.9 The need to improve the quality of the wider learning environment provided for students was a frequent subject for discussion in the team's meetings across both of its visits. In general, academic staff were more critical of the shortcomings of the learning infrastructure but there was also a consensus amongst students studying in all three cycles that their achievement levels were being constrained by inadequate buildings and outdated or non-functioning equipment. In the science and technically based faculties there was little dispute that laboratories required major investment to achieve the significant improvement necessary. Indeed, in some subject areas academic staff were adapting their teaching approaches by including simulation work as a way of mitigating the impact of poor or out-dated facilities. For some faculties, infrastructure problems extended beyond the equipping of laboratories. For example, the Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies does not have space to accommodate its students in appropriate rooms and students confirmed that because of the lack of tiered lecture theatres and overcrowding it could be difficult to hear lecturers; and in some classrooms basic equipment such as overhead projectors were defective. While work had commenced on a new building for the faculty that would provide the level of facilities needed, the completion date was some way in the future because of the funding constraints for capital expenditure.
- 4.10 The team found the university to be very open about the difficulties it faces from the lack of investment in the learning infrastructure; and a number of specific issues are highlighted in the weaknesses section of the SWOT analysis that formed part of the self-evaluation process. The team recognises that there are significant external barriers to alleviating these difficulties. It hoped that the university's senior leadership could continue to work with national and local authorities to accelerate investment funding in the short to medium term. At the same time, the team also recognised and admired the considerable staff commitment to overcoming the immediate problems by, for example, scheduling teaching across a longer working day (8am to 9pm).
- 4.11 In this context it was perhaps understandable that the team found the development of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) patchy with a lack of consistency in the technical platform being used in faculties. Moodle is the VLE that is most commonly adopted but this has not been done in a consistent or systematic way; and indeed the team was told that there was not a university requirement that Moodle should be used as the VLE. The comprehensive roll out of a VLE for staff and students is, however, seen as a university priority. The team was told that the future direction of the VLE will be considered in the Education and Research Committee (all vice-deans are on this committee) and they will be expected to propose the best solution for the university. The team hoped that this decision would be reached in the near future as the current position was a clear inefficiency in the use of scarce resources and a hindrance to the development of more innovative forms of teaching and learning.

- 4.12 Students indicated to the team that, on the whole, they had positive relationships with their professors. Academic staff adopted formal student consultation hours and these were often used to provide feedback on assignments. Outside of those meetings students said that their lecturers were easily contactable with email and phone numbers widely available. Typically, students spend 3-4 hours contact time a day with their professors with additional laboratory time as appropriate to the programme. There was an expectation of 2-3 hours independent study activity each evening or comparable time spent at weekends. The SER indicates that staff student ratios are at a tolerable level with the 2016/17 academic year showing 25 students per academic staff member. The team noted that this had improved significantly in recent years with total student numbers falling and academic staff numbers increasing very slightly. However, there was a concern expressed by students, and acknowledged by the university, that the lack of new academic staff over last five years had led to a degree of inertia and complacency amongst some professors. The team was informed that decisions on new full-time academic appointments rested ultimately with the Ministry of Education and that, in addition, there was now no scope, because of government restrictions, for appointing teaching assistants. The only teaching support was being provided by doctoral students. This situation was also contributing to an increased administrative burden on academic staff. The team accepted that these constraints were of some considerable significance and could easily contribute to a lack of innovation and creativity in learning and teaching. In the short term it suggested that an *increase in the number of visiting external lecturers, including those from outside the Republic of Macedonia*, could provide some badly needed 'new blood' and act as an impetus to wider improvement in pedagogy.
- 4.13 Notwithstanding these factors, the team did find some evidence of diversity and innovation in teaching practice. There was, however, a clear need for existing academic staff to focus more on improving their approach to pedagogy. There was obvious scope for linking this to the development of the VLE; but there were also areas such as assessment practice and the approach to determining learning outcomes and ensuring that they were being met, that needed some further internal academic reflection. Indeed, senior university managers accepted that there were some issues with assessment grading (grade inflation and inconsistency across faculties) although this was seen as an issue for discussion between faculties rather than one for central intervention. In addition, it emerged from the discussions that the team had with external stakeholders that the soft skills of some students required significant improvement. The team believes that the enhancement of soft skills in students is an important aspect of programme development and delivery, particularly at the first cycle, and one that could be addressed in a relatively straightforward manner. In terms of quality management systems, it was something that rulebooks and a future Quality Manual could embed in the processes relating to programme accreditation. Equally, in terms of delivery and student-centred learning there was considerable scope for redesigning assessment tasks to integrate support for the

development of, *inter alia*, communication skills, teamwork and problem solving. *The team therefore asks the university to consider or review its approach to programme delivery to help support the enhancement of soft skills in students, for example, through modified assessment tasks.* While the team accepted that faculties had to be at the forefront in enhancing teaching and learning, there was also a wider university responsibility to support the position of students at the centre of the learning experience. *The team therefore recommends that training and guidance should be organised and delivered to academic staff across the university so that they can provide consistent student-centred learning, particularly in relation to learning outcomes.*

5. Research

- 5.1 The team found there to be a manifest commitment to research at all levels of the university. Equally the autonomy of faculties within the integrated university model provides academic staff with the theoretical freedom to undertake research. These are important considerations. However, the development of a thriving research base presents the university with one of its greatest challenges; and the team felt that, at times, academic managers and the general constituency of academic staff were being overwhelmed by the difficulties of promoting and pursuing research in an environment where there was no national funding for research in universities and meaningful opportunities for individual research were extremely limited. In national terms the research and development budget was said to be 'miniscule'⁷. Government incentives in support of university research largely revolve around a relatively small honorarium (500 Euros) for publications in internationally recognised journals. The last public call for bids for national funding of research came six years ago. Research active staff recalled that in the past it had been possible to become involved in FP7 projects⁸; but this type of project co-operation was now very difficult to engage in largely because equipment was not on a par with EU partners and also as a result of a lack of administrative support in applying for projects and then in providing the necessary on-going support. The opportunities offered by Horizon 2020⁹ are mentioned in the SER but, despite efforts by the university to involve itself in international networks (VISION) to support such project activity, the team found little evidence to suggest that this was bringing any concrete outcomes in terms of core research development. In strategic terms, therefore, the university is looking at how other universities in the Balkans region have tackled the significant step change to becoming more research active institutions. This is seen as part of a process to help establish some clearer parameters for future research development.

⁷ The percentage of GDP devoted to R&D has been static at 0.22 percent of GDP for some years. This is 10 times less than the average for the EU.

⁸ FP7 is the EU's 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development and operated from 2007-2013.

⁹ Horizon 2020 is the biggest EU Research and Innovation programme ever with nearly €80 billion of funding available over 7 years (2014 to 2020).

- 5.2 In the draft Development Strategy research is recognised as being fundamental to knowledge development and knowledge transfer. The dilemma for the university is that its capacity to build a level of research that can respond to both internal and external needs is severely constrained by (1) an internal funding mechanism largely financed via student fees (40% pledged to research) that is subject to the variations of student recruitment and (2) an outdated research infrastructure with buildings, laboratories and basic equipment some way removed from levels found in most other parts of Europe. The team noted the wide demands placed on the 40% of income allocated to research involving as it did investment and investment maintenance, study visits, national and international scientific literature purchasing and access to data bases in accordance with the Law on Higher Education and the Rulebook on the internal distribution of finances. There also appeared to be a disconnection between some national capital investment decisions and the ability of the university to realise the benefit of such investment. For example, the team was told that in 2014 the government had 'donated' three laboratories to the university. However, these remained unused with the equipment still in its packaging. In practice, the university needed further additional funding to train and certify staff in the use of the equipment and this had not been forthcoming. The university was well aware that there were significant efficiency and commercial gains to be achieved from the more effective management of laboratory resources. In this context, *the team encourages the university to prioritise investment in preparing laboratories for national certification/accreditation and ensuring that staff are given relevant training so that these laboratories can start to function at the earliest opportunity.*
- 5.3 In the face of these challenging circumstances, the team was concerned that, more widely, university research policy appeared somewhat fragmented and lacking in clear aims. This is perhaps best reflected in the long list of research ambitions set out in the draft Development Strategy; twenty elements are listed and these range from relatively general tasks to more specific goals. As with other aspects of the university's strategic planning the team was keen to see rather more specific indicators, perhaps established over a 3-5 year period, and a transition from the language of 'increased activity' often used in the draft action plan to concrete and realistic percentage measurement. Such measurable target setting would be more transparent and easier to communicate to the relevant stakeholders and ultimately offer better scope for systematic and regular monitoring. The team understood that there had been a slightly improved trajectory for research projects stemming from enthusiasm of staff and some central university support. However, these encouraging shoots needed to be located in a more secure strategic setting. As a starting point for refining the university's research development strategy the team *recommends that the university consider a research mapping exercise to identify areas of real strength with a view to aiding priority development, and the subsequent establishment of clearly recognised and publicised Centres of Research Excellence.*

- 5.4 In their conversations with academic staff the team heard that the current generation of researchers were used to being self-reliant. In part this was driven by the legal requirements for promotion which stipulate a threshold of research publications in high impact journals to secure academic progression. There were, however, factors other than self-interest at play; and the team found some staff recognition of the relationship between a thriving research environment and the delivery of better programmes for students. There was also evidence of greater innovation in applied research and this was often a catalyst to a greater emphasis on joint or multi-disciplinary research. The team noted, for example, the opportunities for research collaboration between the Faculty of Technology and Technical Sciences and the Higher Medical School. Such collaboration was clearly critical in exploiting commercial opportunities and in making a wider contribution to society. This might be reinforced with university wide financial incentives to form groups prepared to embrace interdisciplinary research. This type of incentivisation was even more important at St. Kliment Ohridski where subject disciplines were geographically dispersed in a number of regional locations. However, it was apparent to the team that a proportion of academic staff needed institutional support to develop their research skills; and this was particularly the case with younger academic staff who might otherwise feel isolated in pursuing their research topics. This was being recognised by senior university managers and one initiative was to bring together one experienced professor with two less experienced researchers as a way of increasing the critical mass for external project bids and activity. The team was also pleased to note the recent establishment of an intra-university conference designed to focus on the preparation of papers for publication in high impact journals and the steps needed to prepare laboratories for accreditation. This move was important in helping to embed an institutional research culture and the sharing of best practice between individuals and across subject disciplines. The team wanted to emphasise the importance of this type of activity becoming a feature of the university's academic calendar. It therefore recommends the *continuation of initiatives such as an annual staff development conference and specialist workshops to support, inter alia, staff competences in writing research proposals, producing work for publication and the sharing of best practice.*
- 5.5 In the 2016/17 academic year the university had 135 doctoral candidates registered across all years of study. Of these, 53 were first year enrolments. Doctoral study programmes (22 in total) are located across all of the university's academic units with technical sciences, education and economics being at the forefront of programme accreditation. These three faculties are also innovating in doctoral candidate support with the involvement of visiting professors from outside the country in both the mentoring and, on occasion, the supervision of doctoral candidates.
- 5.6 Behind these facts and figures, however, the research environment for doctoral candidates mirrors that for academic staff in lacking funding support and with third

cycle researchers seeing few opportunities for project activity or additional research engagement during their studies. Employment opportunities on successful completion of the doctoral thesis are limited. Clearly new academic posts in public universities in the country were subject to government restriction; and business and industry related positions at an appropriate level were very competitive. The team met a small number of doctoral candidates during the two site visits and, notwithstanding these challenges, found them committed and enthusiastic with a broad view of the benefits of a doctoral-level education. They commented that research supervisors were professional, clear in communicating the requirements of the programme and keen to guide and support their candidates through the potential pitfalls of doctoral study. Programme structure involved a substantial taught element in the first year which included coverage of the latest research in the field; however, some candidates thought that the first-year teaching could benefit from being streamlined with perhaps a greater focus on workshop type activity. Access to international journals was said to be poor although supervisors were willing to help with obtaining specific journals.

- 5.7 The team understood that there was little traction around many of these aspects of the doctoral learning environment. It was, however, concerned to hear that there was little sense of a wider doctoral research community. At faculty level there was some coming together of research students in lectures and very occasionally through projects. At the university level there was little or no interaction between student researchers. Doctoral candidates involved in meeting the team commented that this had been the first occasion that they had met each other; and basic facts such as the overall numbers studying for doctoral degrees at St. Kliment Ohridski were unknown by this group alongside the fact that 54 of their total were international candidates. Doctoral research can, by its nature, be an isolating experience; and the team was very keen to see some of those avoidable barriers to sharing experience broken down. Moreover, it was a relatively cost-free exercise to create a greater sense of collegiality amongst doctoral candidates. *The team, therefore, recommends that the university consider the introduction of an embedded doctoral candidate network, including the development of doctoral candidate conferences to support the sharing of experience and best practice.*

6. Service to society

- 6.1 The section in the university's draft development strategy on integration within the local community opens with the following succinct observation: 'The set of relations between the university and its socio-economic backdrop represents, now more than ever, a key factor to the development and sustainability of every contemporary university'. The team agrees with this observation. That set of relations, however, is a complex mosaic which takes time and energy to nurture and which needs to be carefully sustained. It goes to the heart of the mission and vision of the university and the mutual respect required not just between the institution and specific external stakeholders but also between the staff and students of the university and the various sections of society that surround it. These are difficult relationships to assess with any degree of precision. In its meeting with external stakeholders the team often heard representatives talk of the good and positive contact that they had with the university. This ranged across a number of faculties. In addition, St Kliment Ohridski graduates were seen as well motivated when they moved into employment. The university was said to be well respected and described as a visible player in the external environment; but there was also a view expressed that more could be done to enhance its local and national profile. Equally the team received comments suggesting that the university would benefit from developing its capacity to serve the wider Balkan region.
- 6.2 Alongside the first-cycle student internship arrangements that operated with a wide range of local businesses and organisations, the team was given several examples of joint projects with local and national authorities. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, for example, was working with national authorities on projects relating to biotechnology and also on failings in animal welfare and the impact that this could have on human health (parasitic diseases). The Faculty of Education worked closely with local high schools although it was noted that the number of students involved in practical work experience had decreased with the faculty increasingly unable to provide funds to support student mentoring in schools. There was also a close working relationship between the Faculty of Security Studies in Skopje and the government department operating in that domain. Clearly, there was potential for

other university units to engage in joint projects and the Tobacco Institute was mentioned in the team's meeting with external stakeholders as a leading candidate for such collaboration. More broadly, there was said to be merit in the university developing an external services directory. Such proactive initiatives were vital to the university's future growth especially as there was no tradition in the country of businesses providing direct financial support to universities, apart from through student scholarships. There were also well-established plans to set up a Technology Transfer Centre although the team understood that this was currently on hold pending clarification of national legal requirements. A new higher education law was expected early in 2018 and it was hoped that this would allow the university to move forward with finalising the relevant internal statutes. The team regarded this initiative as an important statement of intent in the university's relationship with the local economy; *and it urges the university to direct all efforts to establish the Technology Transfer Centre as soon as possible after the national law is clarified.*

- 6.3 All external stakeholders were keen to stress, from the perspective of the work environment, the difference between theory and practice in terms of graduate preparedness for employment. Alumni of the university were also able to reflect on the way practical learning had been integrated into the curriculum. Some felt that they were well prepared for world of work following their studies; others wondered whether the curriculum at undergraduate level might be changed so that first year study was devoted to theory with subsequent years including a greater element of practical work. The university had established arrangements in some faculties for industry/business experts to provide practical input on programmes as a way of tackling this form of skills gap. This was the case, for example, with food production; and some alumni confirmed that their companies were providing specialists to work with faculties to ensure that the latest commercial/business methods were being introduced into the teaching and learning environment. Companies were also said to be opening up their work practices to visits from students. Equally, the team was interested to hear that such crossover might also be of benefit to second cycle students. For Masters' students such collaboration with business and industry might be structured towards project-based activity and offer mutual benefit for the student and the organisation.
- 6.4 As noted earlier in this report (paragraph 4.13), the importance of soft skills developed through work experience is often stressed by employers. However, despite the range of internship opportunities for undergraduate students at the end of each year of their programme it was suggested to the team that there was still an identifiable under-development of soft skills in some graduates. Obviously the extent of this skills gap varies from graduate to graduate but it was of concern to the team to note comments by a few external stakeholders that for some graduates there was almost a need for companies to start from scratch on the basic aspects of time management, communication skills, team work, and problem solving. The team was

confident that the issues relating to soft skills were well understood by the university and that strenuous efforts were being made through programme design and learning innovation to tackle these developmental needs in students. There were, however, other approaches that might help in this endeavour and *the team recommends that the university consider schemes for student engagement with the local community, for example, volunteering schemes, as a way of addressing this skills gap in a different type of setting and, at the same time, serving society at large.*

- 6.5 In organisational terms the university has established the KREDO Centre as a focus for careers, lifelong learning and alumni activity. In fact, the Centre has developed a wider remit which sets it as an important institutional link between the academic community, students and the local economy. The creation of the KREDO Centre, the team was told, built on extensive work over the previous ten years in fostering relations with the business community. Indeed, it offered a pioneering approach within the higher education sector in the Republic of Macedonia and in its early years of development it worked hard to overcome a lack of understanding and acceptance by the business community. There is strong evidence of the impact of the Centre with a range of outputs from 20 signed agreements with companies, local government and NGOs to the provision of 27 scholarships to first cycle students. The team was informed that the Centre had the strong support of the rectorate with the Vice-Rectors for Academic Affairs and Student Affairs regularly involved in decision-making and efforts to communicate and promote the work of the Centre across the dispersed faculty locations. This was not just a top-down approach. Professors were seen as having an important role in communicating opportunities and persuading their graduates that they had a future in the country. The broader promotion of St. Kliment Ohridski as an integrated university was also a support to the work of the Centre. Notwithstanding these efforts, the team found some students lacking in awareness of the benefits of the Centre. This was particularly unfortunate given that, along with regular careers advice and support in writing CVs and with presentation skills, the Centre was setting up opportunities for students to meet business people to share their experience of developing successful enterprises and also organising weekend workshops to support students in generating their own business ideas.
- 6.6 The team was impressed by the scope of the work of the KREDO Centre and the commitment to a concrete and productive engagement with the local community. And given the special relationship that the KREDO Centre had established with local stakeholders *the team suggests that it should consider whether it could facilitate some dedicated local events highlighting the work of the university.* Alongside its work acting as a conduit to local business it was also evident that the Centre offered a valuable internal resource to students and one that the university wanted to develop. For the team, however, this presented a clear resource difficulty. The Centre operated with only two members of staff, including its Head. And while it was stated that there were creative plans to employ students on an internship basis to support

the activities of career development, alumni relations and lifelong learning, the team believed that this would only provide short-term solutions to problems of workload. If the KREDO Centre was to meet its ambitious remit then there needed to be 'hard' resource support to go alongside the 'soft' support and encouragement being offered by senior leaders. *The team therefore recommends improved resources to support the work of the KREDO Centre, including the development of an effective university-level alumni association.*

- 6.7 The university has consolidated its strategic objectives for service to society around a few key areas including socially responsible and sustainable development; the introduction of programmes with learning outcomes directly relevant to the economy and social development; increased external involvement in shaping the university's strategic direction; and greater university involvement in thematic networks relevant to specific research fields. The team thought that these were manageable and achievable goals and welcomed the direct involvement of the university's senior leadership in driving forward this agenda. The team was also convinced that the university had a wide range of academic expertise that was capable of making a difference to the country's development, whether through the work of institutes such as Hydrobiology and Old Slav Culture or via unique specialist areas within faculties such as the transport department. There were also very positive signs of educational initiatives in life-long learning, including plans to develop training programmes for senior officials in public administration to help them cope with the growing business and commercial demands of their roles.

7. Internationalisation

- 7.1 The concept of internationalisation in higher education is perhaps too often reduced to a list of partnerships and projects, numbers of international students registered on programmes, and staff and student involvement in mobility schemes. Clearly these are relevant components of any university international policy. However, the team was pleased to hear that senior leaders in the university were looking beyond internationalisation as an 'objective *per se*' and viewing it rather as an umbrella for the core functions of education, research, and the staff and student experience; its ultimate objective being to contribute to the quality and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of the work of the university.
- 7.2 The team regarded this broader view of internationalisation as an important driver for the day-to-day efforts to deliver a strategy that would achieve this more holistic outcome. In many ways it was a matter of communicating a concept, setting goals and determining the appropriate tools for implementing the strategy. In terms of both leadership and organisation there was clear evidence of how this might be achieved. The Rector has placed himself at the forefront of the efforts to establish and develop the university's international reputation for quality and excellence in education and research; and he has overseen the creation of a new Senate committee, chaired by the Vice-Rector for Research, responsible for inter-university and international co-operation. The team regarded these as important developments for the university. For while faculties had appointed vice-deans to take forward their international activities, the team understood that co-operation across faculties was relatively weak and historically there had been no mechanism for integrating faculty strategies at the institutional level.
- 7.3 There were indications that this greater focus on institutional imperatives was bearing fruit. For example, the re-accreditation process for programmes had included a thematic element to encourage an increased European focus in the curriculum. The university was also starting to bring a more considered view to the costs/benefits of some of the international partnership agreements that were currently in place. The team noted that 62 bilateral agreements were listed on the university's

website. It understood that a number of these were not, in fact, active or were based on relatively narrow staff interests. This was not a sustainable position in the long term and equally it did not resonate with a more rigorous quality agenda. *The team recommends a more systemic and targeted approach to bilateral agreements with clearly defined links to development goals.*

- 7.4 In terms of the current positioning of the university in the wider European space the team noted that there were very few programmes taught in English¹⁰; and in discussions at both faculty and central level it was acknowledged that more programmes needed to be accredited in English to promote the university's international profile. No doubt this was one contributory factor in the relatively low number of international students enrolling on university programmes (150 across all three cycles in 2016/17). There were, however, multi-dimensional factors at play here. The team noted, for example, that international recruitment to third cycle programmes was building well with entrants now coming from Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. The university was also reviewing the role of double diplomas as a recruitment tool. In many ways this picture demonstrated two key facts that have been emphasised in this report. First, that robust data followed by detailed analysis is needed to inform decision-making and secondly, that resource planning and the careful allocation of scarce resources go hand in hand with development strategy. Thus, while the team supports the university's desire to increase the number of programmes offered in the English language, *it asks the university to ensure that adequate support is given to the staff delivering these programmes.* Similarly, target setting for international activity is imperative in the planning and monitoring of investment decisions, including staffing levels and the use of staff time. *The team therefore recommends that the university sets targets for the recruitment of international students to an agreed percentage of the overall student population.*
- 7.6 There is, perhaps, a degree of irony in the fact that many young people in wider society in the Republic of Macedonia are making decisions to live and work abroad while staff and students in the university seem somewhat reluctant to take up short-term academic mobility opportunities. There are, of course, financial constraints, and the limited allocation of places available through the Ministry of Education for Erasmus exchanges is not helpful in stimulating greater interest. However, the team was made aware that this reluctance to engage with mobility schemes was also influenced by a cautious, rather risk-averse mindset, particularly amongst students. When linked to what university senior managers regard as a serious lack of language skills amongst both staff and students, this risks becoming an entrenched and long-term justification for inaction. The university does, of course, need to re-double its efforts to improve understanding of the benefits of such schemes, build confidence in students, and consider greater incentives for staff; but

¹⁰ A total of six programmes - two undergraduate and four postgraduate.

perhaps most importantly it needs to invest in *improving the foreign language proficiency of staff and students to support mobility in relation to education and research.*

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The team was told in one of its discussions with the university's senior leadership that there were two overarching ambitions, first to defend the principles of the university and second to introduce new energy into its development. Throughout the two site visits the team found a calm and determined leadership, willing to embrace change and, just as importantly, adopt the tools of change. The university was now building on an important period of self-reflection and starting to set clearer strategic goals and priorities. It would, however, continue to face significant challenges, particularly in relation to the external environment; and given the specific funding constraints on the university it was of vital importance that scarce human and physical resources were targeted in the most efficient and effective manner. The team was confident that the university's staff had the intellectual capacity to respond to these challenges although it was also conscious that the complexity of the change agenda was placing a considerable burden on the university's senior leadership and management teams.

- 8.2 In these circumstances, the ambition to create a truly integrated university that could come together behind an agreed development strategy for the next five years while, at the same time, securing appropriate academic autonomy in faculties and research units was perhaps its most critical and important challenge. The team found strong evidence of the senior leadership's commitment to developing a sense of unity built on trust with the aim of engendering pride in staff as members of the university. Clearly, this sense of belonging to the university needs time to develop. This is not a path to centralisation; rather, in the view of the team, the integrated university is the organisational mechanism to support the defence of the principles of the university at a time when increasing complexity and competition in the higher education sector would otherwise eat away at the sustainability of individual academic units.

Summary of recommendations

1. Executive action through the rectorate to support the re-establishment of the student voice at university level as soon as possible.
2. Continue to reflect on mission and vision to ensure that they are based on well-articulated and shared values.
3. Strategic development should focus on SMART goals and associated indicators balanced around key strategic approaches.
4. The action plan should be streamlined around strategic goals and the revised mission and vision.
5. Consider establishing an International Advisory Board.
6. Develop a better understanding of a quality concept, its meaning and latest methodologies across the university.
7. Reflect on the appropriate quality management system to be introduced in the university.
8. Reflect on student survey content, timing and follow-up action (closing the feedback loop).
9. Develop a Quality Handbook, in addition to the existing rulebooks.
10. Ensure that other performance assessment mechanisms are put in place to support quality assurance and quality enhancement.
11. Increase the number of external lecturers, including those from outside the Republic of Macedonia.
12. Consider different approaches to addressing high drop-out rates, including programme design and structure.
13. Consider the approach to programme delivery to help enhance soft skills in students e.g. through assessment tasks.
14. Training and guidance should be provided to staff so that they can deliver consistent student-centred learning, particularly in relation to learning outcomes.
15. Consider a research mapping exercise to identify real areas of strength and thus aid priority development (Centres of Excellence).
16. Consider the introduction of an embedded doctoral candidate network, including the development of doctoral candidate conferences to support sharing of experience and best practice.
17. Prioritise investment in preparing laboratories for national certification/ accreditation and ensure that staff are given relevant training.

18. Continue the initiative of an annual staff development conference/workshops to support staff competences in writing research proposals etc.
19. Establishment of the Technology Transfer Centre as soon as possible after the national law is clarified.
20. Consider schemes for student engagement with the local community e.g. volunteering schemes.
21. The KREDO Centre should consider whether it can facilitate local events highlighting the work of the university.
22. Improve resources to support the work of the KREDO Centre, including the development of an effective university-level alumni association.
23. Improve the foreign language proficiency of staff and students to support mobility in relation to education and research.
24. A more systemic and targeted approach to bilateral agreements with clear links to development goals.
25. Set targets for the recruitment of international students to an agreed percentage of the overall student population.
26. The university should ensure that adequate support is given to staff delivering the planned increase in English language programmes.