

UNIVERSITY OF MARIBOR

EVALUATION REPORT

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Team:

Kerstin Norén, Chair

Gerard Wrixon

Simona Lache

Dan Derricott/Jacob Müller

Fabrice Hénard, Team coordinator

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of University of Maribor. The evaluation took place in 2013 in the framework of the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme. The visits were carried out in March and June 2013. The evaluation team took account of the earlier IEP evaluations undertaken by University of Maribor (in 1998 and in 2004).

1.1. The Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. The University of Maribor at a glance

Maribor, the seat of one of the three Slovene universities, was first mentioned in historical documents as a town as early as the year 1254.

The first institution of the present day university was the School of Economics and

Commerce, which was founded in 1959 and offered a two-year programme of study.

In 1961 the Association of Institutions of Higher Education in Maribor was formed. The organisational model of the association and its relations with the schools and other entities were similar to the organisation of a university. After the individual schools developed into full-fledged faculties, the Association of Institutions of Higher Education became a university. The Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia confirmed the university status of the institutions of higher education in Maribor in 1975.

Over time the university developed the following faculties: Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Faculty of Energetics, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Faculty of Logistics, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Faculty of Organisational Sciences, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Tourism, Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security, Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Law. There are two other university entities: the University Library Maribor, and the student dormitories.

Not all of the faculties are located in Maribor. The Faculty of Agriculture and Life Sciences is located in Hoče, the Faculty of Organisational Sciences is located in Kranj, the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security in Ljubljana, the Faculty of Logistics in Celje and Krško, the Faculty of Energy Technology in Krško and Velenje and the Faculty of Tourism in Brežice. The rest of the faculties are spread all over the city of Maribor.

The University of Maribor cooperates with various institutions of higher education and academic associations throughout the world in different research fields developed by its faculty members. Cooperation encompasses numerous activities ranging from study visits to joint research projects. The University of Maribor is active in various networks, and multilateral programmes of cooperation, including the Lifelong Learning Programme, TEMPUS, CEEPUS and the 7th Framework programme.

Courses of study offered by the University of Maribor and its member faculties are degree study programmes leading to the award of diplomas and credential programmes leading to the award of certificates. Degree study programmes can be undergraduate (academic or professionally oriented first degree study programmes), or graduate (second and third degree study programmes). The University of Maribor endeavoured to adapt its study programmes to the requirements of the Bologna Process. Study programmes are full or part-time. In the academic year 2011/2012 there were 16,481 undergraduate and 3,544 postgraduate students at the University of Maribor. The total number of academic staff in 2012 is 889, of whom 16.5% are full professors.

1.3. The self-evaluation process

On 19 October 2012 the Rector Prof. Danijel Rebolj appointed a self-evaluation group for the IEP evaluation. Members of the group included Prof. Bojan Borstner (Faculty of Arts), PhD, chair; Prof. Marko Marhl (Faculty of Education), PhD, coordinator for the preparation of the written self-evaluation report; Prof. Samo Kralj (Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics), member; Prof. Zoran Ren (Faculty of Mechanical Engineering), PhD, member; Prof. Rajko Knez (Faculty of Law), PhD, member; Assist. Prof. Lučka Lorber (Faculty of Arts), PhD, member; Prof. Samo Bobek (Faculty of Economics and Business), PhD, member; Assoc. Prof. Zoran Novak (Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering), member; Iztok Slatinek (Quality Office), member; mag. Dunja Legat (University Library Maribor); member, Rok Hržič (student – Faculty of Medicine), member; Rok Dolinšek (student – Faculty of Civil Engineering), member. Hermina Pika Radmilovič (Quality Office) was appointed coordinator of the IEP evaluation.

The process of self-evaluation was carried out in cooperation with university bodies and different staff members. Interim reports and final versions were presented and discussed with different boards at university and faculty levels.

The IEP evaluation team (referred to as “the team”) recognises the fair selection of SEG members, which reflects a balanced representation of the University of Maribor’s structures and their range of expertise within the institution.

The team recognises the quality and consistency of the SER as well as the participatory approach taken by University of Maribor. The report is concise and has been used extensively by the team.

1.4. The evaluation team

The team consisted of:

- Kerstin Norén, Rector, University West, Sweden, Team Chair
- Gerard Wrixon, former President, University College Cork, Ireland
- Simona Lache, Vice-Rector, University of Brasov, Romania
- Dan Derricott, Student, Lincoln University, United Kingdom (first visit)
- Jacob Müller, Student, University of Potsdam, Germany (second visit)
- Fabrice Hénard, Higher Education Consultant, Learning Avenue Consultancy, Team Coordinator

Dan Derricott could not participate in the second evaluation visit, and was replaced in the team by Jacob Müller.

The team thanks the Rector Prof. Danijel Rebolj and Hermina Pika Radmilovič, coordinator of the IEP evaluation, as well as the vice-rectors, the management team, the Senate members

and deans of faculties, the students, support staff and the stakeholders whose engagement in the evaluation was remarkable and allowed the team to build a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the functioning, strategies and challenges of the University of Maribor. The team appreciated the warm welcome from the whole community.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 A university with a broad mandate

The university mission statement encompasses a wide range of values (e.g. honesty, curiosity, creativity, freedom of spirit, cooperation and knowledge transfer in the fields of science, art and education) and pursues overarching goals reflecting the humanistic approach (e.g. taking care of mankind and sustainable development, expanding knowledge, raising awareness, promoting humanistic values as well as the culture of dialogue, quality of life and global justice). This global orientation is not disputed within the institution and most teachers and students share the humanistic philosophy and strongly believe in the European dimension of their university. However, the mission statement leads to various understandings when it comes to faculty level. The SER actually specifies that the “University of Maribor has a broad-based vision and mission enabling faculties and other university members to specify their own visions and goals within the framework of UM's mission”. The university allows faculties and other entities (library and dormitories) to define their own vision and goals as long as they comply with the overarching mission statement, which itself remains vague. Today, the University of Maribor struggles to define itself and make it distinctive from other national or regional universities. The excessively broad mission statement deprives the University of Maribor of a university-wide identity and hinders the implementation of an overarching strategy.

The team values the effort undertaken by the university to devise specific strategies, for example for research, internationalisation or European integration. The team points out a series of faculty-specific strategies that are aligned with the faculty-wide mission statements. The team however recalls that the accumulation of faculty strategies rarely brings about a consolidated university strategy. Therefore, the university is advised to pay closer attention to the consistency of the faculty strategies.

The University of Maribor envisions to be placed at the heart of a “globally recognised innovation ecosystem encouraging the creativity of both employees and students”. In order to fulfil such ambition, the university will be expected to become a recognised actor playing a key role in human capital and economic development across the region and beyond (e.g. Austria and Central Europe). Despite progress, there is still a long way to go to translate the vision into reality, as shown by the evaluation of the achievements in teaching, research and internationalisation in the following sections of this report.

The team therefore recommends that the university have a more concise mission statement and to make sure that faculty-wide strategies are consistent with it.

2.2 The lack of university integration

The university was established less than 40 years ago. More and more faculties have been

expanding with no binding regulations. The University of Maribor has therefore become an amalgamation of faculties that are entrusted with a lot of decision-making power and can operate independently. Six faculties have been established outside of Maribor, which constitutes an additional barrier to a cohesive policy. The notion of the university as an organisation *per se* is therefore quite new and its role and added value compared to that of the faculties remain unclear to many teachers and students.

The team stresses the importance of the major challenge for the university to be more inclusive for the benefit of all faculties and ultimately of the students. If no change occurs, risks are high:

- Risk of unequal treatment between students. Students are treated differently according to their faculty, for example, the allocation of ECTS depends on the faculty policy. Some faculties are more equipped to advise students on their study path and future career, but not all can do so, which results in unequal treatment of students. The Team hopes the newly established Career Centre will be effective for all. It is expected to provide career counselling to all students and graduates of the University.
- Risk of loss of financial control, as some faculties are not anchored in a university-wide framework that would secure the process and support the faculties to progress in their management.
- Sharing knowledge and experiences among 17 faculties is a challenge. The implementation of reforms is hindered or occurs at different paces according to the will and capacity of each dean. There are few possibilities to disseminate good practices across faculties. Deans, teachers or students have initiated lots of quality improvements. Some of them should be worth expanding across the university (e.g. an e-learning software invented by a teacher).

The team is aware that several attempts to foster a university culture failed in the past. The earlier IEP report in 2004 already noted the discrepancy between faculty strategies and functioning. However, external accreditation stimulated reflection on inclusiveness, but without tangible results. The team underlines and supports the university leaders in pushing forward the university strategies in research, internationalisation and European integration. Moreover, the team supports the teaching strategy, which the university started implementing already. The slow but perceivable emergence of the university culture across some faculties should be encouraged, as they start understanding the potential added value of it and could champion the rector's venture in strengthening the university as a driver for all faculties.

The team was surprised by the mechanism in place as depicted by the SER on the reporting system: "At university level, the operation of university member is monitored in a number of ways: quarterly reports on the implementation of a financial plan, annual report and final account, internal audit...University bodies decide to take action if irregularities have been

identified and may require corrective measures. Annual plans include activities in the field of education and scientific research. They are adopted by management boards and senates of university members and approved by the University of Maribor in its common annual plan”.

The team thought that such a reporting system would have helped in increasing the effectiveness of managing the institutions as a whole; it has not done so, which demonstrates how orchestrating autonomous faculties remains challenging.

The team recommends the university to explore platforms and mechanisms that would help faculties to share the information better and prevent them from working in silos. The university needs to know what happens at field level with a view to i) prompting change to happen in the faculties undergoing difficult reforms or budget constraints ii) supporting their efforts in improving quality.

The team subsequently recommends the university to build up a central intelligence function that would detect and capitalise good practices and anticipate risks at faculty level. Such a function could furthermore provoke emulation amongst faculties and promote quality.

Likewise, enhancing communication between the university central level and the faculties as well as across faculties is of key importance. The team thinks that the introduction of a university-wide power is not likely to undermine the leeway and responsiveness of the faculties, provided that the principle of subsidiarity remains.

The team recommends the university to keep on working closely with deans and middle management and to promote the added value of the role of the university within faculties. This will increase the visibility and recognition of the university in the region and beyond, as the university will speak with a more united voice than at present. It will also make cost sharing among faculties possible.

2.3 A complex governance structure

As stipulated by the Higher Education Act, the bodies that manage the University of Maribor are the Rector, Senate, Management Board and Student Council.

The Senate of the university is the highest academic and professional body whereas the Management Board is the highest managing authority of the university. The rector is the head of the university ensuring legality and efficiency of operation and represents the university. Four vice-rectors usually assist the rector in specific fields determined by him.

The faculties have their own bodies, which are also specified in the Statute of the university: the Academic Council, Senate, Management Board, Student Council and Dean. The Statute of the university lays down in detail the powers accorded to the bodies of the university, faculties and other university entities. It also defines a status of “professional body” for entities that are not legal entities and have limited powers in legal relations, with the

exception of non-budgetary activities related to market-orientated activities. Senate and management board of faculties, for instance, are described as professional bodies.

Faculty senates adopt development programmes and examine the reports regarding faculty achievements. The faculty management boards decide on issues concerning the management of funds and income obtained by faculties on their own behalf and on their own account, but they do not decide on funds obtained by the university. These funds are allocated to faculties in accordance with specific criteria. Deans are considered as professional managers of faculties and chair the management boards of faculties. Besides, the rector may confer a part of his powers on deans, and some of them have been transferred. The University of Maribor's library and student dormitories also hold the status of professional bodies.

As stipulated in the SER, the delineation of powers and jurisdictions between university bodies and faculty professional bodies is clear. However, there is a major discrepancy between the university Senate and Management Board, which negatively impacts on the organisation of the faculties and how study programmes are managed. Indeed, the university Management Board does not deal with financial issues for programmes and teaching. Should a new programme be decided by the Senate, its financial aspects are not discussed by the Management Board. This situation results in inconsistencies within some faculties, where programmes are offered on paper, but the faculties are unable to afford them in practice.

The rector has set an informal platform for discussions with deans and the vice-rector in charge of finance. The team values any initiative to spur discussions and coherence amongst decision-makers. However, the role of this group should be more formalised and less peripheral than it is today in the management of the university.

At a time of budget cutbacks, the allocation of funding magnifies these managerial problems. The new national funding allocation system comprises two parts: basic funding depending on costs estimated the previous year, and development funding, linked to quality parameters. The financial constraints did not allow the ministry to launch the development funding. The university budget is therefore tied to the basic funding, the level of which decreased by 6,5% in 2011. For years, especially when funding was dependant on students' intake, the number of programmes inflated. Now the financial situation leads the university leaders and deans to say: "We must learn how to survive". The crisis and the subsequent dwindling funds have actually fostered discussions between the university leaders and the deans, who are striving to preserve the existence and development of the university and its faculties.

To a certain extent the crisis has driven changes in the programme offer of the university. The availability of funding has become the adjustment variable. For instance, the Faculty of Economics adjusted courses according to its financial possibilities (fewer elective courses, more core courses common to all departments within the faculty).

With such constraints, the university's initiative to define a long-term development strategy, in line with what is legally required in terms of the financial framework, is questionable. Instead, the team would encourage adopting a medium-term approach that would allow the

university to better cope with the uncertainty and flexibility required by a changing financial environment. In this regard, a multi-year financial contract would secure the university's development and provide clear-cut perspectives on what could be realistically achieved. The university will be able to take wise decisions on its strategy under the strict condition that the ministry and the university can agree upon a medium-term financial framework.

2.3 An effective inclusion of students in the governing bodies

Students are well represented in all decision-making and advisory bodies. They are trained on quality assurance and many take their role seriously with high professionalism, either at the faculty or at the university level or at the Student Council. They can benefit from special arrangements in order to make their role as student representatives compatible with the time required for completing their study programmes.

Teachers and leaders consider them as partners. This is an asset in creating a university-wide identity and fostering a quality culture that would permeate every layer of the university, including students.

3. Teaching and learning

3.1 Students are pleased with their studies

The majority of students met by the team expressed high satisfaction regarding the organisation and the content of their studies. They place high confidence in their teachers, with whom they cooperate. Teachers are likewise satisfied with the quality and enthusiasm of their students.

Students value the introduction of the Bologna Process as evidence of the European approach of their university and an external driver for improvement. The university considers the Bologna Process as a vehicle for a student-oriented teaching process, including elective learning content accounting for at least 10% of degree programmes, thereby enabling individualisation of studies. Today, most programmes are following the three Bologna cycles with Bachelor (first-cycle) programmes lasting three years, Master's (second-cycle) programmes typically lasting two years (with the exception of the Master's programme general medicine, which lasts six years) and doctoral (third-cycle) programmes lasting three years.

The range of programmes offered at the University of Maribor as well as the proximity with Austria is an asset for students and young graduates, who do not feel confined in the region of Maribor but rather connected to central Europe. Maribor is perceived by students as a gateway to European higher education and the job market.

Students have high hopes regarding the tutoring system that was introduced in 2011. They are also offered information literacy courses in order to make the transition to the academic and research environment easier. The new career centre should help them in connecting with the job market. However, students feel that e-learning tools have not been sufficiently implemented.

Students appreciate tuition-free education. Equipment, facilities, and libraries, especially the university library (the second largest in Slovenia), provide students with a stimulating learning environment. Doctoral students underline the richness of the university library and the open access to data. Dormitories are of good quality and affordable despite the economic crisis, which has consequences for the university budget. The university accommodates 2 800 beds for 4 000 applicants, and rooms can be available in the course of the year. Students are happy with the high quality of extracurricular activities — the University of Maribor has a reputed sport centre — that furthermore reinforce the connection with the city and its surroundings. From the students' viewpoint, the University of Maribor has become a key actor in boosting the city's life.

3.2 Research permeates teaching

Students are given the opportunity to participate in research programmes or projects conducted by their teachers, and this contributes to further develop their skills. They value this opportunity and teachers seem pleased to stimulate the interest of their students,

introduce them to the possibilities offered by a research career or prepare Master students to become acquainted with research activities. This trend is more developed in sciences than in arts because research in the former includes more collaborative projects in which students can take part more easily. Doctoral students are also included in joint research projects. In 2013, the University of Maribor introduced the Demola concept, which has been developed and tested in Tampere (Finland) in order to encourage cooperation between students, companies and higher education institutions through project assignments that could be of interest to the economy. Within the framework of DEMOLA, companies publish project assignments to be completed by groups of students under the mentorship of companies and researchers from UM.

The team encourages the field of arts and humanities to foster opportunities to integrate students, including first-year students, into research activities.

3.3 Further emphasis on practical project work

The SER notes that problem-oriented education in the context of planned project work has proven successful for certain interdisciplinary degree programmes (Mechatronics, Industrial Engineering, and Architecture). Both students and teachers value project-based learning as student-teacher interaction becomes smoother and learning is judged more efficient. In addition, the University of Maribor should consider offering problem-based courses for all disciplines, so that it becomes a distinctive feature that would differentiate the university from traditional research-oriented institutions.

From the employers' viewpoint, the preparation of students for the real world is crucial as the economic parameters are changing in the world, and Maribor and its region need graduates trained with the skills of today.

The team recommends setting up the Strategic Council as stipulated in the draft Development Strategy 2013-2020. Likewise, the university is advised to keep carrying out surveys on job-market trends in Slovenia and in the region of Maribor, and to adjust the programmes subsequently to the needs of human capital for the 21st century.

3.4 The increase of programmes and courses at the expense of a more effective education

Each faculty at the University of Maribor is allowed to define priority fields of study or degree programmes at their own discretion. Several issues converged and led to an increase in the number of programmes, at the expense of a harmonious and synergetic development of the university training offering:

- The funding system in place before 2004 encouraged deans to take in a higher number of students in order to increase funds. As the funding was correlated to student intake, there was no incentive to streamline the number of programmes. Although the funding system has been amended several times in the period since

2004, it nonetheless always correlated to the number of degree programmes and enrolment until 2011. For this reason, faculties were not interested in streamlining degree programmes. After the decree on funding has been amended in the beginning of 2011, the process of streamlining degree programmes began.

- Leaders and staff wanted to turn the University of Maribor into a multidisciplinary university capable of offering the widest range of programmes in all cycles in Slovenia.
- The freedom of the academics operating in an unregulated university framework resulted in the expansion of courses within programmes, without any real diagnosis of the needs.
- An underlying competition between faculties to recruit the highest number of students emerged. The increase in the number of courses has logically led to the creation of new faculties.

These trends resulted in the duplication of courses that no regulatory mechanism was able to prevent. There was additionally no political willingness to streamline the programmes.

The rapid expansion of courses and faculties have called for more equipment, facilities and libraries, with no sense of cost-sharing, since every faculty was keen to exhibit their own specificities with no willingness to share their strengths and mutualise their forces.

The team thinks it is crucial for the faculties to work together so that sharing of resources can be beneficial to the whole community. Two examples show that there is still much progress to increase cooperation between faculties and with the central management:

- The library information system is coordinated by the university library, which is considered an independent university entity, whilst libraries located within faculties are considered organisational units of faculties. Content-related activities are integrated and are conducted in accordance with common standards. However, the academic community and librarians at faculties have not supported the development strategy prepared in 2010 by the university library for an inclusive library service at the university.
- The central management coordinates the development of support services within the framework of the Rectorate. However, a common development strategy for support services at the level of faculties has not been formulated.

The team therefore urges the university to foster collaborative reflection with the faculties with a view to better connecting the services and equipment for the benefit of all students at the university level, not only those from one's own faculty. At a time of greater multidisciplinary, which the University of Maribor advocates and in which several faculties are already engaged, coordination is of key importance. In the same vein, the university should make sure resources are not used to duplicate resources but to explore areas where synergies are possible.

The team does not recommend rushing into mergers or the closing down of faculties. However, the university is highly advised to spearhead strategic thinking about possible synergies.

The university should also reflect on how to define and differentiate academic courses and professional courses. Both offer a similar content; they lead to similar professional titles; and they are conducted in the same facilities by the same teachers. However, the entrance requirements are lower for professional students than for the academic candidates. In addition, the professional students seem somewhat isolated in the university (e.g., they do not have representatives on student councils). The university should take this into consideration, and foresee a stronger development of lifelong learning programmes. This would benefit the local economic environment. Closer interactions with stakeholders should therefore be foreseen.

3.5 An in-depth reflection on the educational strategy is necessary

The consequences of the above should be taken into consideration by the entire university staff:

- The educational provision offered today is quite blurred and difficult to understand for applicant students and even more for employers and international stakeholders.
- The financial euphoria between 2003 and 2010 is over now, and the University of Maribor must adapt its educational provision to what is financially feasible.

The team recommends launching a collaborative reflection on the educational priorities of the University of Maribor, in the light of the needs of the students, the job market, and the society at large. The strategy on education that is underway should explore all the aspects associated with the relevance and the expected quality of higher education in Maribor.

The team recommends identifying more clearly the structure in which the university-wide reflection on the content and the organisation of programmes should take place. Today, neither the Senate nor the Management Board is dealing with this issue. The reflection is being inconsistent from one faculty to another.

In parallel, the University of Maribor should think about supporting teachers in implementing alternative pedagogies, sharing good teaching practices, applying problem-based learning to all disciplines, further explore multidisciplinary, and reach a common understanding of the Bologna Process philosophy and tools (calculation of ECTS, delivery of Diploma supplement). In some faculties, there are niches of teachers applying these methods, while others retain a classic approach to their teaching. There is also the computer centre (RCUM) that provides students and teachers with technical support for the teaching and learning process, but not everyone is aware that it exists.

In order to be consistent with the Development Strategy aimed at becoming an innovative university, it is crucial that the teaching community and the learners are well acquainted with the newest pedagogical methods. The team recommends the university to set up a Quality

Teaching Centre that would orchestrate the teaching staff's professional development, carry out R&D in pedagogy, and serve faculties as well as teachers individually. Furthermore, the Quality Teaching Centre would contribute in translating the Bologna Process into the classroom. There should be a connection between this Centre and the university library, which is closely linked to the academic community and provides support for educational activities and scientific research conducted at the university.

3.6 Despite progress, the objectives of the Bologna Process are unevenly understood

The Bologna Process has not helped to streamline the programmes and has been unevenly implemented, exposing students to unequal situations, for instance in the allocation of ECTS. Some faculties are richer than others and can provide more support, for instance helping students to find internships, while students in other faculties are left on their own. The team was surprised by the varied understanding of the Bologna Process in each faculty, and sometimes from teacher to teacher within a faculty. There are still a lot of misconceptions about the Bologna Process, and it remains too often an easy scapegoat when the university encounters difficulties.

The team recommends the university to ensure that the training process in the context of the teachers' habilitation includes a more in-depth knowledge of the Bologna Process. More systematic communication about the added value as well as the limits of the Bologna Process should be developed.

4. Research

4.1 A strong commitment in building up research capacities

The research work at the University of Maribor is being conducted in the context of 46 research programmes and one infrastructure programme, of which 20 are being coordinated by the university. Scientific research is being conducted by the University of Maribor within the framework of 14 basic projects, 15 applied projects, three postdoctoral projects and 13 target-oriented research projects. In 2011, nine start-up companies were established with the help of the university's business incubator.

Regarding international scientific cooperation, the University of Maribor is involved in 50 bilateral research projects, 97 partnerships in FP7 projects and 83 other research projects (e.g. ERANET,¹ EUREKA² etc.). Special emphasis is placed on activities for cooperation in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, within the framework of which the university will propose and coordinate projects in the field of human resources development and studies for the economic sector.

The team recognises the engagement of the university in human resources, through the Human Resources Strategy that incorporates the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (2010-2014). For this purpose, the university committed to training 106 young researchers with the objective of producing the next generation of research groups. In addition, the University of Maribor facilitates access to sources of information via the library.

Many initiatives have been undertaken such as: RA:ZUM (Research and Arts Zone of University of Maribor to innovate excellence in research for all areas), CORE@UM (Centre for Open Innovations and Research of University of Maribor associated with the European scheme on active and healthy ageing), and the Out of the Box seminar series, which encourage unconventional and creative thinking and new ideas. The university aims to set up a modern infrastructure centre entitled LAB:UM and securing resources from Structural Funds to this end. The University of Maribor has adopted the 2013-2018 Research and Development Strategy based on smart specialization as well as relevant national and European documents. Furthermore, the University is carefully planning appointment rules that emphasize 4 areas: basic research, applied research, internationalization and cooperation with students.

The team also values the efforts made towards the dissemination and popularisation of scientific research towards civil society. The University of Maribor conducts a wide range of activities including events, meetings, exhibitions, publications, encouraging local centres for

¹ The objective of the ERA-NET scheme is to step up the cooperation and coordination of research activities carried out at national or regional level in the member states and associated states.

² EUREKA is a Europe-wide network for industrial **research** and development, strengthening European competitiveness by promoting market-driven collaborative research and development

the promotion of science, promotional material, websites, etc.

4.2 Research performance in some areas

The SER stipulates the following: “The University of Maribor’s performance over the last five years was evaluated with regard to comparable European universities as well as other Slovene universities. An analysis of citations reveals that research conducted at the University of Maribor is comparable to that conducted at European and other Slovene universities. The number of publications and their citations indicate a growing trend”.

After close scrutiny of the SER and additional documentation provided during the site visit, the Team points out the high variations in terms of research publications. Indeed, only faculties of sciences (medicine, engineering, chemistry, natural sciences and maths) publish and carry out substantial scientific projects. The Faculty of Law has not published and faculties of arts and humanities publish very little. The team also noticed that the University of Maribor has been unsuccessful in obtaining patents, despite the increase in patent applications.

4.3 Research priorities should be made

The University of Maribor is young and has devoted most of its efforts to expand education rather than research over the past 10 years. However, in its attempts to profile itself as a research-intensive university, it meets hard competition from other well-considered research-intensive universities, either in Slovenia or in neighbouring regions such as Austria or Northern Italy. The University of Maribor is undergoing severe budget cutbacks and its stringent budget is apparently here to stay. There is little chance for the University of Maribor to fund enormous labs and expensive equipment. It could join large European research projects but with a limited capacity in leading them. In addition, the university should consider its positioning in the light of critical mass that is possible to reach at country level.

The team thinks that the faculties that are not carrying out much research nowadays should focus more on applied research. This would fit better with the current (and foreseeable) future of the university. Such a direction would not impede the research-performing faculties from undertaking basic research. The team believes that applied research would facilitate the inclusion of arts faculties into projects. Raising European funding through structural funds would be more feasible than earmarked research funds. In this way, students would be offered more opportunities to join projects, including those in arts and humanities. The University of Maribor has already demonstrated its capacity to lead applied science projects. Discussions with researchers and university leaders demonstrated that the location of the University of Maribor in a cross-border region enables other types of research activities than those undertaken in the capital city. The team agrees and think such positioning should

improve the university's visibility.

For instance, RAZ:UM linked the University of Maribor and the European Capital of Culture through more than 30 projects, all of which linked various specialist and mostly interdisciplinary projects from the field of science and education: Researchers' Night, House of Architecture, House of Science, Art: Now, Student Oasis of Culture; Out-of-the-Box Conference 2012, etc. In 2013, the University of Maribor is actively participating in projects conducted within the framework of the European Capital of Youth.

The team recommends building upon the recent experience of project-based activities and fostering genuine applied research. It supports multidisciplinary research projects (e.g. the one on ageing populations) as it offers opportunities to all faculties to cooperate within the same university frame.

If the University of Maribor becomes the vehicle of a regional innovation ecosystem in the future, which it aims to do, research orientations might need to encompass basic research. However, today, half of the faculties have little chance of reaching the highest standards of international research. Applied research is by contrast more likely to boost their scientific activities and harness them in the knowledge economy.

5. Service to society

5.1 A strong commitment in the third mission of the university

There are a large number of activities conducted at faculties and other university entities, out of which the University of Maribor coordinates several joint activities. The university is committed to developing its “third mission” and to fostering “the interaction with the environment in form of transfer of knowledge and good practices in the field of scientific research, artistic work and education” as stated in the SER. For instance, the university is participating in the project “European Indicators and Ranking Methodology for University Third Mission” (E3M). It also coordinates the project “Co-operation of SEE Science Parks for the Promotion of Transnational Market Uptake of R&D Results and Technologies by SMEs” in the framework of RA-ZUM.

The team values the direction taken by the University of Maribor to take advantage of its geographic location (i.e. nearby Austria and central Europe). Numerous development agencies are operating in this area and have links with the University of Maribor (e.g. the national agencies for knowledge transfer, the Public Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Entrepreneurship and Foreign Investments (JAPTI), the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information (SCSTI), the ASTER Joint Stock Consortium from Italy, the Hungarian Investment and Trade Agency (HITA), etc.). There are huge opportunities for networking and cooperation in the field of scientific research and development.

In 2011 the University of Maribor established the Council for Sustainability and Social Responsibility. Chaired by the rector, the Council formulated new strategic guidelines. In April 2012, the Committee for Sustainable Development and Social Responsibility was established and prepared a draft policy of sustainable development and social responsibility as well as a list of relevant activities until 2020, among which priorities for 2013 have been identified. “By disseminating knowledge and implementing examples of good practice, University of Maribor will reduce costs, promote social responsibility and enhance environmental awareness” (SER).

5.2 Good connection with the local environment

The team values the work achieved with the surrounding society. The University of Maribor is a reputed actor according to a wide range of stakeholders (companies, media, social services, cultural organisations, hospitals). To the stakeholders, the university plays an important role in the Maribor region. The challenges reside first in the commitment of the external stakeholders in university affairs. It is not widely spread across Slovenia that non-academic actors play a role in pedagogy or governance of higher education. At the University of Maribor, the development of internships seems to be a driver in better connecting the institution with companies, but there is still much progress to be done.

Over the past three years, the career centre of the University of Maribor has been successful

in strengthening university links with society. The centre conducts various workshops, courses and consultancy activities in order to facilitate the transition from the university into the working environment. Systematic and more formalised partnerships are being undertaken. Databases on external stakeholders are being set and communication towards the external world of the university is gaining momentum. There is a professional team fully dedicated to the third mission of the university, the student placements and the integration of companies and services in the university affairs.

The team recommends further enlarging the scope of the career centre, which could become an agency that gives advice on job offers and market demands. The centre should also develop social entrepreneurship whereby investing in people and knowledge is conducive to the development of the region, not only from a strictly economic standpoint, but also for its capacity to explore new avenues for the future (there is for instance an Erasmus programme for young entrepreneurs that could be mobilised in this respect).

5.3 Improving the stakeholders' participation

The University of Maribor regrets that too few programmes include content dealing with the innovation and intellectual property management for contemporary society and future generations. Many programmes tend to overlook entrepreneurship.

The team recommends formalising a structure involving the stakeholders on a permanent basis. They actually find it difficult to “understand” the university unless they have had previous contact with some teachers.

Alumni students should be solicited to reinforce contact between their work places and their university. They could act as points of contact for students looking for internships and teachers willing to develop contacts for projects with stakeholders.

The team also considers that the position and social recognition of the University of Maribor by the wider community make it a legitimate focal point where external stakeholders and the university community could converge.

6. Quality culture

6.1 A robust system relying on a Quality Development Centre and a Quality Assessment Committee

Quality culture dates back to the late 1990s. The University of Maribor started to design an internal quality system in 1997 by establishing the Quality Assessment Committee. It became a permanent committee of the Senate of the University in 2003.

In 2006, the University of Maribor decided to establish an independent professional service in charge of quality, to coordinate activities in the field of quality monitoring and to provide the Committee with technical support. Such a body is not mandatory by law and reflects the institution's commitment towards quality assurance. The Quality Assessment Committee prepares the reports for the Senate. It also collects the reports prepared by the faculties, which have set up their own quality units. Every year, the Quality Assessment Committee presents a range of reports and crosscutting analysis to the Senate.

Since 2009, the University of Maribor has been conducting internal institutional evaluations in accordance with the standards and criteria enacted by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. In 2012, the university started processes to ensure that the results of internal institutional evaluations are followed up.

In 2011, the newly elected rector identified quality development as a priority, appointed a vice-rector for quality development, and established the Quality Development Centre with two staff members. The Centre is in charge of promoting and conducting various activities for the development of a comprehensive quality assurance system.

The Senate adopted a Quality Manual in 2012 so that objectives and processes associated with quality assurance are clearly stipulated in a unique document. Such a project exemplifies the commitment of the leadership to raise a university sense of community. During the same year, some activities in the field of social sciences, humanities and natural sciences have been evaluated through peer reviews.

Upon the initiative of the University of Maribor, a resolution on the commitment of Slovene universities to develop a quality culture in higher education was prepared and signed by the rectors of Slovene universities in March 2012.

2.3 Quality assurance has recently become a university's top priority

The Quality Assessment Committee is not entitled to enforce its recommendations and act under the authority of the Senate. Teachers, leaders and students have complained about the limited influence of the reports. The Senate seems reluctant to act on some of the recommendations in the reports.

On the basis of self-evaluations, university entities are expected to prepare action plans containing corrective measures and monitor their implementation. The Quality Assessment Committee requires university members to include a detailed analysis of the action plan from the previous self-evaluation period in their current self-evaluation report. Some do, many do not. The SER acknowledges this weakness: "A significant disadvantage is the delayed response to identified deficiencies in the system. The university has an underdeveloped internal quality system. In addition, numerous employees, students, officials and members of university bodies do not understand how important it is to create a system of quality assurance and assume individual responsibility".

As far as quality is concerned, there is no university-wide monitoring system and no action plans with corrective measures. The Quality Development Centre is working out a system for monitoring action plans of faculties and other university entities, where internal follow-up institutional evaluations could be conducted. The team strongly supports this initiative.

The future of quality assurance lies in the Quality Development Centre that has been established to promote the concept of quality culture to the whole university community, and not only directed towards the Senate or specific groups. Its role should contribute to quality improvement and should not be limited to portraying the diagnosis on quality. It works in cooperation with other foreign agencies, with the national quality assurance agency of Slovenia as well as partner institutions of Slovenia. It is a centre of resources for the university. It has played a major role in the design of university-wide strategies. The University of Maribor leaders take the Quality Development Centre seriously and has invested much in human capital (human staff is of great value) and positioned the centre as an official body. A vice-rector has been specifically assigned to quality assurance. The vice-rector as well as the Quality Development centre staff cooperate on a regular basis with the deans, the management board, and the national quality assurance agency. Two members of the centre serve as members of the IEP pool of experts. Therefore, they are also connected to the European landscape of quality assurance for higher education. The interaction with the Quality Assessment Committee is ensured and the vice-rector is an invited guest to the committee's meetings.

The team was impressed by the commitment of the Quality Development Centre to communicate and make quality assurance more accessible to the community. The team did not meet any resistance from academia regarding quality assurance. The University of Maribor has for a long time involved students in the development of quality. The university provides them with training in order to develop a harmonised model for student participation in the quality assurance system. The centre pays attention to identify the areas on which quality assurance can produce the best effects. The tangible outputs are visible (e.g. manuals, quality assurance strategies), and the quality assurance process is in place and formalised. Communication and training are expanding (via workshops, website information, seminars, etc). Follow-up is being progressively carried out and is likely to become a routine practice. Some faculties are new and the centre adapts its role to those that deserve more dedication. The commitment of the centre's staff and vice-rector pays off.

The team recommends the University of Maribor to provide incentives to take up decisions on quality assurance. There are still too many reports that end up on the bookshelf. The team also urges the University of Maribor to tie quality assurance to financial issues as the two fields remain somewhat separated. Some of the funding should be conditional on the extent to which the faculties respond to the recommendations in the yearly quality reports.

Quality assurance should ideally serve the goal of building an inclusive university. The team thus thinks that quality assurance should embrace quality teaching and learning: should a quality teaching body be established, connections with the Quality Development Centre will be key.

6.3 Progress to be made on evaluation by students

Various types of student surveys contribute to gradual changes to degree programme and processes, which are becoming more student-friendly. However, the SER underlines problems with regard to the key survey – the student survey on the performance of teachers –, which also plays an extremely important role in the appointment procedure:

- Students are not convinced that the surveying method does guarantee anonymity, and therefore they hesitate to evaluate the work of teachers honestly.
- The grading scale (from -2 to 2) has not been correctly evaluated; the majority of teachers receive an above average grade (above 0).
- The response of faculty management staff to survey results has been different at each faculty. Some do follow up weak results while others ignore them.

There is a university system of evaluation by students that runs in parallel with the evaluations at faculty level. The team recommends revising the university student evaluations in order to find more synergies with the evaluations defined at faculty level.

7. Internationalisation

7.1 A dynamic internationalisation strategy

The University of Maribor has actively cooperated in the Erasmus Programme since 1999 and has signed 425 bilateral agreements under this programme. In the academic year 2012/2013, there were 323 outgoing and 398 incoming Erasmus students. Short-term mobility is also intensive in the international summer schools carried out at the departmental level each year.

In addition to Erasmus arrangements, the University of Maribor has signed bilateral agreements with 95 partner institutions from four continents. The University of Maribor is also a member of various international associations, such as the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC).

For international short-term students, selected courses and programmes are available in the English language. Selected programmes at the Master's and doctoral level are also offered in English.

7.2 A more focused strategy is needed

The University of Maribor considered that internationalisation has not yet paid off in terms of visibility in the European Higher Education Area. The university leaders therefore engaged in an ambitious internationalisation strategy meant to pervade internationalisation across and within all faculties. The team values the main objective of the University of Maribor to consider internationalisation as a vehicle for quality improvement. In addition to supporting student and academic mobility, the University of Maribor believes that internationalisation should permeate the syllabi, the pedagogy, the research activities and commercialisation of research, and every aspect of what anchors a university in the globalised world.

The University of Maribor has defined special geographical areas (central Europe and some large foreign regions) and is evaluating the consistency of its links with partner universities, in order to discard the empty shells and root the internationalisation strategy on win-win partnerships with foreign institutions.

The team recommends ensuring that faculties have embedded the internationalisation strategy and have a say in its implementation. It is crucial for an effective internationalisation of the university to speak with a unified voice when it comes to external relationships. All teachers should know why and on which area the University of Maribor is internationalising education and research. Otherwise there is risk that the strategy is disconnected from the faculties' real interest.

The team recommends the University of Maribor to look for university networks with similar

institutions to share practice for better teaching and research when institutions share similar profiles. The team also underlines the necessity to make the different strategies (education, research and internationalisation) consistent with each other.

8. Conclusions

The team acknowledges the range of achievements in research and teaching since the earlier institutional evaluations (1998 and 2004). It also points out that some of the main challenges identified by the past evaluations remain, especially that faculties are too independent of the university. The key challenge today is therefore to enforce reform.

The main weakness of the University of Maribor lies in a non-integrated institution composed of independent entities. More cooperation is needed, which would be beneficial to the faculties and ultimately to the quality of the educational provision at the University of Maribor. The situation will not be viable in the long term otherwise. Financial difficulties and increasing competition between higher education institutions across Europe and worldwide might undermine the achievements of the university since 1975. Providing added value to faculties and managing them – without hindering their operational autonomy – is a condition for the University of Maribor to envision the future with confidence.

Summary of recommendations

Governance and institutional decision-making

- Make sure faculties' strategies are in line with the university-wide strategy,
- Have a more concise university mission statement,
- Set mechanisms so that faculties share information between them and with the university central services,
- Set a central intelligence function,
- Set up the Strategic Council with stakeholders

Teaching and learning

- Enhance the educational offer in terms of life-long learning programmes,
- Establish a Quality Teaching Centre connected to the Quality Development Centre,
- Make sure that the teachers are acquainted with the Bologna Process,
- Consolidate and develop the Career Centre

Research

- Develop applied research and project-based education

Quality culture

- Correlate funding to quality achievements,
- Make better use of quality assurance outputs (reports),

- Revise the student evaluation systems,

Internationalisation

- Make sure that internationalisation pervades all faculties and teachers,
- Develop networks with universities sharing similar profiles.