

**European University Association (EUA)  
Institutional Evaluation Programme**

**UNIVERSITY OF ŽILINA**  
***EUA FOLLOW-UP REPORT***

*June 2006*

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## **Introduction**

This report is the outcome of a follow-up evaluation organised by the European University Association (EUA) within the framework of its Institutional Evaluation Programme. The follow-up evaluation was preceded by an Institutional Evaluation of Žilina University (Žilina University) in 2002. The current process is embedded in an evaluation by EUA of all 23 universities in Slovakia between autumn 2005 and early 2008.

### ***EUA institutional and follow-up evaluations***

Following two successful conferences on the theme of Quality and Evaluation, the Committee of the CRE (now EUA, the Association of European Universities) decided in 1993 to offer its member universities, which today exceed 770 in over 45 countries, the possibility of being reviewed so that their strengths and weaknesses in the area of institutional and quality management might be assessed. EUA evaluations are peer reviews, the members of evaluation teams are all rectors, presidents, pro-rectors or vice-presidents or former holders of these positions. That means that the evaluation teams know about the recurring problems related to university management and in this way are able to ask all relevant questions. The evaluations serve university leaders as a tool to assist them in their efforts to improve their management and to promote the universities' capacity for change. The EUA expects that the growing number of its institutional reviews contribute to the promotion of a culture of quality among its members, and to the dissemination of examples of effective strategic management among the European universities.

The European University Association Institutional Evaluation Programme began eleven years ago, and has conducted 150 evaluations of higher education institutions in addition to 20 follow-up evaluations in 36 countries world-wide. Since 1998, what was then CRE has offered, as an extension to its Institutional Evaluation Programme, the possibility of a follow-up review, combined with a follow-up visit. The purpose of the follow-up evaluation is to assist the university to evaluate the progress it has made since the original review. What was the impact of the original review? What use has the university made of the original review report? How far has it been able to address the issues raised in the report? The follow-up review is also an opportunity for the university to take stock of its strategies for managing change in the context of internal and external constraints and opportunities.

As with the original evaluation, the cornerstone of the follow-up review is the university's self-evaluation, which allows the university staff, as a team, to understand their institution's strengths and weaknesses. In the follow-up review, the self-evaluation report focuses on progress made since the first review, possibly indicating barriers to change. The report will also indicate the issues the university wishes to discuss with the follow-up team. Monitoring the impact of the recommendations presented in the original evaluation report is one of the primary aims of the follow-up process. However, since the overall review process is a dynamic and not a static one, the follow-up review should take into account new developments and reforms, both within the institution and within its wider environment, and adapt its recommendations accordingly. Furthermore, the follow-up process could also review and give feedback on the problems that may have occurred in the implementation of the recommendations.

Institutional evaluations consist of a preliminary visit of two and a half days, where the evaluation team can familiarise itself with the university, its staff and the context in which it

operates. The team may request additional information to clarify issues that came up in its discussion with members of the university. The three-and-a-half-day main visit follows a few months later, at the end of which the team provides the rector and his or her invited audience with an oral presentation of its main findings. In the follow-up procedure there is only one visit and with a smaller team of a chair, another member and a secretary, if possible the same persons who visited the university for the original review.

In line with the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme as a whole, the follow-up process is a supportive one. The EUA does not wish to provide Universities with a blueprint for its development; rather the review process is a consultative and supportive one.

### ***The institutional and follow-up evaluations of ZU***

For the original visit in 2002, the evaluation team to the University of Žilina consisted of Len F.W. de Klerk (former rector of Tilburg University, the Netherlands), chair, David Smith (former principal of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland) and Jarmo Visakorpi (professor emeritus of the University of Tampere, Finland), members, and Christina Rozsnyai (program officer, Hungarian Accreditation Committee), secretary. The preliminary visit to ZU took place on 6-8 February and the main visit on 24-27 March 2002.

The follow-up evaluation visit to ZU took place on 10-12 May 2006. After the evaluation team read the self-evaluation report it requested some additional information, which the university readily supplied. During the visit, the team interviewed Rector Professor Ján Bujnák and Vice-Rector for Foreign Affairs, Professor Marián Dzimko; the rectoral team, comprised of two additional vice-rectors; the self-evaluation committee; the deans; senate members; quality management officers, members of central management and the central administrative staff; students and doctoral students; and heads of departments. Two of the meetings included Professor Milan Dado, who had been rector at the time of the original institutional review in 2002.

The members of the EUA Evaluation Team for the follow-up review of ZU were

- David Smith, former Principal of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland;
- Edward Jezierski, Vice-Rector for Education, University of Lodz, Poland; and
- Christina Rozsnyai, programme officer at the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, Team secretary.

The Evaluation Team much appreciated that the members of ZU were forthcoming in providing information to the team and that the visit was very well organised. The Team was also grateful for the very generous hospitality afforded by the university. The discussions between members of ZU and the Team were very open and constructive. As during the original visit, the current University leadership appeared to have a good working relationship with the other members of ZU.

As with the original review report, this Evaluation Report was prepared for the University's leadership, who are free to decide on its use. Given that for the presentation of the oral report, the Rector invited a large audience, including everyone the Team had met, the Team anticipates, and indeed EUA encourages, the dissemination of both the Self-Evaluation Report and the Evaluation Report to a wide audience in order to reap the rewards of the University's development as a result of the exercise, both among its members and external stakeholders. A discussion of the issues described in this Report within the University and with other partners could continue to strengthen the quality culture at ZU. The evaluation

Team hopes that its Report will fulfil the leadership's expectations about the EUA evaluation exercise.

### ***EUA institutional and sector evaluations in the Slovak Republic***

Jointly with the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic has engaged the European University Association to undertake an evaluation in accordance with the EUA Institutional Evaluation Guidelines. Each institution is evaluated against its specific aims and objectives and the evaluation is oriented towards offering recommendations for improvement rather than passing summary judgement or ranking institutions.

The evaluation is taking place in the wider context of

- the Government's strategic objective of placing Slovakia in a favourable position in meeting the Lisbon objectives;
- the Government's interest in ensuring the successful implementation of the Bologna reforms;
- the Government's acknowledgement of the need to increase the transparency and the attractiveness of the sector for the public.

Under the terms of reference for the project, EUA is evaluating all 23 Slovak universities beginning in September 2005. Each evaluated university receives an individual evaluation report at the end of its evaluation. The institutional evaluations examine

- Organisation and structures for carrying out the main missions of higher education institutions;
- Effectiveness of internal quality processes and their relevance in decision-making and strategic planning;
- Perceived gaps in the internal mechanism processes and frameworks and recommendations for enhancing them.

These key elements are placed within an analysis that takes into account the local, national and international context. In addition, EUA provides a sector report highlighting crosscutting issues and recommendations arising from the institutional evaluations and considering the conditions of research in Slovakia. The project concludes in January-February 2008, when the Slovak Rectors' Conference organises a concluding seminar with the higher education institutions and interested stakeholders to discuss the sector report and come to an agreement about the next steps. Finally, the sector report will be published.

### ***The Evaluation Team's recommendations in 2002***

The university should consider

- drawing up a strategic plan which describes the profile of the university at present and in the long term, the steps the university will take to achieve its stated goals, why and how it would like to expand, why and how the university strives for internationalisation, how it proposes to obtain additional income, how it sees its regional, national and international role;
- establishing a comprehensive internal quality control system;
- striving for increased interfaculty and interdepartmental co-operation, not only in research but also in teaching;
- eliminating the duplication of teaching and establishing instead a unit to teach core science subjects, including applied mathematics, physics and chemistry, on the Bachelor's and Master's level;

- rationalising its faculty structure especially with regard to the Faculty of Science, and setting up a Teacher Training Institute or Faculty to fill the university and regional need in this field, rather than striving for a humanities faculty in the short term, but which may evolve from teacher training once that is well established;
- setting up a language teaching centre, perhaps within the Teacher Training Institute, which could also bring income to the university and increase internationalisation both directly (by inviting foreign language teachers, even in the form of summer courses) and indirectly (by raising language skills);
- focusing its expansion on the areas in which it excels on a national and even international level (transport and communication and related sciences, engineering, informatics and management);
- involving industry to a far greater extent than now in practical teaching for its students.

### **Main changes at ZU since 2002**

A new Higher Education Act was passed by Parliament in February 2002, resulting in a number of fundamental changes at Slovakian higher education institutions:

- In line with the Bologna process, the traditional single-stream study programmes were redesigned as Bachelor and Master programmes and doctoral studies into PhD programmes;
- The University, and not the faculty, is now a legal entity;
- The University is seen as a service provider for internal and external stakeholders (students, industry, employers, the state);
- Quality assurance and enhancement instruments have been introduced, a general awareness of the importance of quality control of teaching, research and management has become prevalent;
- Professors and Associate Professors are no longer appointed for life but receive tenure after three re-appointments;
- The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has been implemented for all studies.

These transformations brought with them a number of structural changes:

- The University has adopted a Strategic Plan for 2003-2007 outlining ZU's profile, namely sciences and professional fields connected to transport and communications – which is the University's historical core – and its implication for education and research as well as external activities;
- A Department for Development was set up, headed by a vice-rector;
- One research and several service institutes and centres have been set up or were expanded;
- ZU is working to intensify its research activities and depth in the areas of its profile in order to meet the government's criterion for a "research university" (and thus secure considerably more financing than other higher education institutions);
- Within the Faculty of Science, the Departments of Mathematics and Physics were merged, and the Department of Physical Sciences at the Faculty of Science was integrated into the Faculty of Electrical Engineering;
- Internationalisation has increased, focusing on participation in international research projects;
- The number of foreign students has nearly doubled (to 103 students in Bachelor and Master programmes);
- Increased interdisciplinary and inter-faculty projects also focus on research but involve teaching as well;
- Course content has been updated to reflect labour-market needs,

- The electronic information system has been greatly expanded and involves all levels of the University;
- Departments and laboratories have been technologically upgraded;
- Some departments have been closed and new ones created;
- E-learning and life-long-learning programmes have been set up;
- Initiated by ZU, a Scientific and Technological Park has been established to facilitate knowledge transfer.

In general, the entire region around Žilina is experiencing a boom in development and economic expansion, which is an enormous change since the first EUA evaluation took place four years ago. The boom affects not only such industries as electronics, software, automobiles, wood and paper production, tourism and the service sector, as stated in the University's Self-Evaluation Report, but in the regional economy as a whole. The growth provides an opportunity for the University to improve and expand its activities and, reciprocally, to ensure employment for its students.

## **The findings of the follow-up evaluation**

### ***Organisation and management***

The EUA Evaluation Team noted during its follow-up visit that ZU has put great effort and resources into introducing the recommendations the EUA Team made in 2002. Consistent with its strategy, two of the University's faculties, Electrical Engineering and Management Science and Informatics, have expanded into branches in central and south-west Slovakia. The number of faculties has remained the same:

- Operation and Economics of Transport and Communications,
- Mechanical Engineering,
- Electrical Engineering,
- Civil Engineering,
- Management Science and Informatics,
- Special Engineering, and
- Science.

The Team believes that the University has the proper structure at this point, with a balanced size of faculties.

Among the changes in Slovakian higher education, the introduction of the new higher education law has been the most far-reaching. Universities have become legal entities instead of their individual faculties, which has strengthened the decision-making powers of the Rector. ZU has re-delegated much of its central authority to the faculties, with deans deciding human resources management and development, handling finances allocated to the faculties, deciding on student admissions, etc. The University believes that faculty-level decision-making ensures flexibility and efficiency. This, no doubt, is rooted in the traditional way of thinking about university management in Slovakia. The Team supports this approach and agrees that faculties are well equipped to make decisions about establishing the optimum conditions for producing superior teaching and research.

With the new law, universities in Slovakia have attained ownership of their property. The level of freedom this grants to universities is coupled with considerable financial responsibility and calls for modern financial management skills not required in the earlier structure. The Evaluation Team found that ZU was able to take full advantage of this

opportunity. By selling some buildings and concentrating its resources in mainly one area, it is in the process of constructing a modern campus, complete with dormitories and student service facilities. The concentration of all the faculty buildings, dormitories and recreation area also contributes to shaping University identity, while increasing the efficiency of its human and financial resources. As far as the facilities are concerned, however, the Team would like to point out that while, on the one hand, ZU accommodates an unusually large number of students in University dormitories, on the other hand this seems to be at the expense of good quality housing. Students mentioned in interviews that there is an uncomfortable level of overcrowding in their rooms.

The Team had the impression that the University's financial management overall is satisfactory within the constraints of the law. The University receives its budget from the state and allocates it to the faculties based on the decision of the Senate. Research income, on the other hand, goes directly to the person and department awarded the grant, with 10% overheads allocated to the University and the faculty to which the department belongs. The members of the University appear to be satisfied with this structure.

The power of the Rector has increased with the new management structure. However, the Higher Education Act states that "The office of a member of the Academic Senate of a public higher education institution is incompatible with the office of Rector ..." (Section 8 (3)). The Team continues to believe – as its 2002 Report also emphasised - that the division between actual power and responsibility is uneven. The Senate has the power to make, or approve the Rector's decisions in almost all areas, yet as a 45-member body it cannot be held accountable for its decisions. Conversely, the Rector is held responsible for all matters of the University. From its experience in almost all other countries, where the Rector formally chairs the Senate, the Team proposes that the University look into the advantages of such a structure when discussion about changes to the law are again on the table.

The Team recognises that the profile of the Faculty of Science continues to remain a general one, including teacher training, language teaching, and library science, which is in line with the University's mission to cater to the needs of the population in the region. Regional need is also an aspect of concern to the Accreditation Commission, which has accredited this faculty on this basis. Thus the faculty is increasing its involvement in research projects and conference participation. The Team sympathises with the very sensible ambition of the Faculty of Science to change its name to cover its broader scope, even though re-accreditation for an expanded content is still remote.

### **Research**

With regard to research, the Evaluation Team would like to underline the strong research orientation of all the faculties, and the considerable research potential the University has built up. ZU is eager, at this point, to attain the status of a "research university", in competition with other universities in the country. In addition to raising ZU's reputation and bringing with it a label of quality, the status is foreseen to bring with it a considerable financial allocation from the government. The Team believes that ZU could strengthen its research potential by expanding the size of its departments with this strategy in mind. The goal would be to achieve the optimum size for maximum research output. Perhaps with fewer and larger units efficiency could be raised.

An openness toward the world, a high research level and the provision of PhD training are features of ZU that confer upon it the strong potential to become a "research university".

Some areas of excellence, such as transport, are a unique strength that provide ZU with a competitive edge both on the national and international level. The Centre of Transportation Research is a place of excellence, recognised by the European Commission, and is an admirable example of ZU's potential. At its interview with the faculty deans, all reported an increase in research projects and exhibited an eagerness to establish their faculties as innovative divisions of a competitive university. As an example, the Team had the impression that the Faculty of Special Engineering seems to have a highly competitive profile, having introduced unique new study programmes such as Crisis Management. Another example is the Institute for Competitiveness and Innovations, where the Team similarly observed progress, with achievements in biomedicine and PhD student involvement.

### **Teaching**

The Evaluation Team has noted the dynamic changes that have taken place at ZU since 2002, which extend to all faculties and also include the introduction of many new study programmes. They have expanded into new, competitive subjects in the area of the University's profile, such as Mediamatics (as part of Library and Information Studies) in the Faculty of Science, or Crisis Management and Security Management in the Faculty of Special Engineering. The University's Aviation Training and Educational Centre is unique in Slovakia as the only non-military institution offering pilot training and other aviation-related education. Other areas that are less within ZU's traditional profile of transport and communications and related engineering subjects, such as social pedagogy or music education, have received accreditation because they fill a regional need. The Faculty of Science, with its mixed profile, is intended to fulfil this regional function. Here, too, the Team noted a drive to improve quality and raise the institution's profile.

In the context of teaching, the salary structure must be addressed. The relatively low level of salaries, as compared to that in industry, makes it difficult to recruit top-level academic staff. The Team is aware that a national salary scale exists, but perhaps there are ways to break out of the structure via additional incentives based on merit. Salary may be a real problem in attracting talented graduates who belong to a new generation, that of "European citizens".

The Team repeatedly noted the high drop out rate, which averages around 45% for first-year students at ZU. One factor contributing to the high drop out rate may be the relatively high proportion of young people (over 50% of 18-year olds) entering university in Slovakia in the last decade or so. This may explain why this rate is similar in other Slovakian universities. Other reasons mentioned included: the difficulty of a programme; the elimination of entrance examinations; and that some subjects are sometimes a student's second choice and they switch to a better offer. Providing more detailed and readily available information about course content to prospective applicants may be one way to alleviate the problem. The "children's university" held for smaller children in the summer to introduce them to student life and work is an original initiative to be commended and which may also contribute to moderating the problem.

The Team has the sense that PhD students are in a difficult situation. With their obligations in teaching and attending classes, the time for the actual objective of conducting research is significantly reduced. Three years is too short a time to prepare a thesis at the required level. ZU teaches about 15% of Slovakia's doctoral students in full-time and a somewhat lower proportion in part-time studies, while its share of doctoral graduates is 9.1% and 4.7% respectively. Among PhD students the drop out rate is strikingly high, with only 10-15% of students accepted into doctoral programmes attaining their degrees. One of the reasons given

was that the salaries offered to young people by business and industry draw them away from their studies. This is clearly an area which ZU – and Slovakian universities in general – must address on a structural level.

There is a need for co-operation with industry also at the third level of studies. However the advantages of being invited to do projects in industry may be counterbalanced by the fact that firms may prevent the students from publishing their results because of patent laws. This, again, is a question ZU – and probably Slovakia – must solve in the near future.

Practical training for ZU students in industry continues to be a problem. The University should continue its efforts to stimulate industry in offering training places, which would mutually benefit both parties. Some faculties have taken the initiative in this and have been successful. The Team accepts that in some cases it is the industry itself, which has not been forthcoming. The Team observed that ZU students need some help in finding jobs.

### ***The Bologna Process***

The Evaluation Team noted a fast progress of ZU in the Bologna process. The three-cycle structure of study programmes was introduced by the Higher Education Act and at ZU a great many departments have already adopted it. The new structure needs to be accepted in a country in which there was a long and successful tradition of single-stream Master's studies that were recognised in the employment market. However, the University's internal and external stakeholders should realise that introducing three-cycle studies provides an opportunity for flexibility of study arrangements by enabling students vertical and horizontal mobility. In an age of mass education, and also given the high dropout rate in Slovakia, increasing this opportunity for mobility would provide ZU with a competitive edge within the country and raise its attractiveness abroad. In this regard the Team commends ZU and its departments for having taken advantage of the opportunity given by the need to restructure its curricula to introduce new, competitive and marketable study courses.

The Team accepts that in some study programmes, three-year Bachelor studies are too short to meet the goal of providing marketable education. Engineering may be such an area as has been found in some other European countries, and as was argued in some interviews. The lack of Bachelor degrees being recognised by the market results in a pressure for graduates in the first cycle to automatically continue their studies on the Master's level. The University should take this into account when developing new programmes and admission procedures.

The Team felt that during curriculum restructuring into Bachelor and Master programmes, level outcome requirements for first and second cycles, such as the "Dublin descriptors", may not have been applied as much as they could have been. The team realises that, as was mentioned in the University's comments to the Team's oral report, the restructuring of the new curricula was a wide-ranging process and was done in consideration of the need to reduce theoretical subjects in the Bachelor programmes and replace them with applied ones in order to produce marketable degrees. The response in interviews, however, seems to indicate that there is still room for refinement of the curricula. Together with the market's inevitable growing acceptance of the new degrees, an optimum structure can be attained if the dialogue with the business and industrial sector in developing new programmes is sustained.

### ***Internationalisation***

A very important development for Slovakia since 2002 is the country's accession to the European Union. ZU has made use of the opportunities this offered. It has taken enormous

advantage of the opportunities offered by incoming industry as well as by finding links with industry and universities in other countries.

ZU has, moreover, considerably increased its international research links and the mobility of University staff. At the same time however, the mobility of students is still low. ZU is aware of this fact and is searching for ways to improve it. The Evaluation Team suggests that one way to stimulate additional interest in students to go abroad would be to invest in marketing the different possibilities students have for study abroad and provide extensive assistance for students in the many details where they need help to achieve this goal. The international office, in addition to helping foreign students coming to ZU, could also, for example, involve returning students to disseminate their experiences.

The Team was pleased to note that various levels of staff, including administrative staff, seem to have significantly improved their English language proficiency. This is the basis for profitable external co-operation with European universities.

### **Quality assurance**

The EUA Evaluation Team paid special attention to ZU's implementation of a quality assurance system. The speed and efficiency with which the University has introduced quality assurance measures is to be praised. The Team was pleased to note that ZU has participated in the "Quality Culture Project" organised by EUA to raise awareness of quality assurance within universities and that it seems to have made good use of the experiences it gained. The Team discussed the issue with different groups of the University community (deans, heads of departments, administrative staff and students, in addition to the self-evaluation groups). The opinions differed slightly, but the system seems to work. Some aspects still need to be strengthened, for example, it would be helped by a higher response rate of students in their evaluations. This would be stimulated if the University could inform the students about actions taken in response to identified quality deficiencies.

The beginnings of a "quality culture" have definitely taken root. Quality culture means that all internal stakeholders – members – of a university are aware of the need for, and their personal responsibility in, improving the university's quality of teaching, research and services. Spreading of good practice is a gainful measure for expanding real quality culture to all stakeholders. The results of actions taken after quality weaknesses have been identified must be publicised in order to avoid making the quality evaluation exercises self-serving and to install the perception that they have a benefit to the University and the individual.

### **Information Technology**

The EUA Evaluation Team has observed great progress at ZU in having introduced information technology in teaching (e.g. posting literature, examination times, and communication between students and teachers) and in the University's management system. With this, the University is playing an important role in implementing the Lisbon Strategy.

## **Conclusion**

ZU has made most encouraging progress since the last evaluation by EUA in 2002. It seems to have found its niche in those areas in which it can be strong and competitive, while, at the same time, fulfilling its obligations to provide a range of educational needs in the extended region. The EUA Evaluation Team hopes, and indeed is confident, that ZU is well on its way to achieving the status of a "research university". Such a status would be thoroughly deserved.