

## **Mykolas Romeris University**

### ***EVALUATION REPORT***

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## **1 Introduction**

This report is the result of the evaluation of Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania (hereafter MRU), which took place in IEP evaluation round 2012/2013 with the visits of the five-person evaluation team (hereafter the team) in November 2012 and February 2013. The present report was then drafted and finalised.

It's worth mentioning that the university underwent a full IEP evaluation in 2006. The current evaluation is not a follow-up of the 2006 one. As the interval between the evaluations was too long for a follow-up exercise, the university requested a full evaluation anew.

### **1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme**

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. 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 and international 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 Mykolas Romeris University and the national context**

MRU was established by the resolution of the Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania on 28 October 2004, although it began its activities in 1990 after Lithuania's declaration of independence. It's located in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania with one faculty located in Kaunas, 100 km from Vilnius. At the time of evaluation there were 6 faculties, 39 departments and 2 institutes with a total number of students of 20,993 and staff 1 321 (academic staff 924). It offers first cycle and second cycle courses, as well as post-graduate courses and is allowed to award PhD degrees in certain fields.

MRU strives at "developing a thorough personality in individuals while forming human values, professionalism, entrepreneurship and independence, which is reflected in the university graduates' ability to get employed" (the self-evaluation report, hereafter SER).

The operational environment of higher education in Lithuania has experienced some changes in recent years. A new Law on Higher Education and Research<sup>1</sup> was passed in April 2009, giving the universities a high degree of autonomy: "a higher education institution shall enjoy the autonomy which covers academic, administrative, economic and financial management activities, and is based on the principle of self-government and academic freedom" (Chapter 7, art.1).

Thus, the law ensures financial, research and staffing autonomy of the university. With regard to academic activities, there is a significant autonomy concerning, i.e. the order of studies, preparation and approval of study programmes and other activities. Autonomy of teaching and research is perceived as a positive attribute by the MRU staff — the university is believed to be very competitive in these areas and able to set its own priorities, shape its actions and design study programmes. However, there are also national regulations that need to be complied with, i.e. establishing new study programmes requires accreditation from the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), enrolment of students of first year of Bachelor studies is organised by the Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions for Organisation of Joint Admission (LAMA BPO) authorised by the Ministry of Education and Science based on admission rules approved by Senate.

With respect to the economic climate in Lithuania, the country has been facing the same trends as other European Union countries. According to the Lithuanian Labour Exchange in 2012, the unemployment rate in Lithuania was 10.3% and the unemployment of young people (up to 25 years old), according to Eurostat data, was as high as 32.9% in 2011. At the same time, negative demographic trends, such as aging of the society and growing emigration, pose a general threat to the higher education landscape in Lithuania. The leadership reported that the MRU community is aware of the threats and the need to act in response to the changing situation, but is at the same time confident about its future — for the time being,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc\\_l?p\\_id=366717](http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=366717)

the university still has no difficulties in recruiting new students as there are still more applicants than students accepted.

### **1.3 The self-evaluation process**

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a group led by Vice-Rector for Education, prof. Giedrius Viliūnas. The members of the group were: Deputy Head of self-evaluation group prof. Dr Inga Žalėnienė (Vice-Rector for Research and International Relations), Academic secretary prof. Dr Nijolė Burkšaitienė (Head of Study Office, Deputy Vice-Rector for Education), Audra Dargytė Burokienė (Senior Academic Assistant, Study Office, International Exchange Unit), Rimantas Kanopa (Director of IT Centre), Vita Neimantaitė (Chairperson of International Relations Committee, Students' Representative Body), assoc. prof. Dr Birutė Pitrenaitė (Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Politics and Management), Gedrutė Račienė (Head of International Relations Office), prof. Dr Irmantas Rotomskis (Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Finance Management), prof. Dr Aelita Skaržauskienė (Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Social Informatics), assoc. prof. Dr Lora Tamošiūnienė (Institute of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages), Dr Stasys Vaitkevičius (Vice-Rector for Development), assoc. prof. Dr Regina Valutytė (Vice-Dean of Law Faculty).

The SER was informative and descriptive and followed the IEP Guidelines for Institutions. A very important part of the SER was constituted by the Strategic Plan. Although the IEP team was left with some open questions after reading the report and its appendices (e.g. it would have appreciated information and analysis of the university's finances and its internal allocation of resources), the two evaluation visits as well as the additional material requested by the team and supplied by the university gave the team a good understanding of the university and its strengths and challenges.

The self-evaluation group stated that the report was widely discussed by the university community, distributed across the university or accessible on the intranet. Unfortunately, the self-evaluation report was not translated into Lithuanian; this might have been one of the reasons why some of those whom the team met during the first visit had limited knowledge of the document, university-wide issues and strategic objectives.

The IEP team is grateful for the significant effort undertaken by the members of the self-evaluation group and the whole MRU community to develop the SER, which served as a reliable source of information for the team and was definitely an important step in building a self-evaluation culture. The team believes that the preparation of the SER might have helped to develop a better degree of self-knowledge through discussion of the current situation and collection of relevant data.

## **1.4 The evaluation team**

The self-evaluation report of the Mykolas Romeris University, together with the appendices was sent to the evaluation team (hereafter the team) on 16 October 2012. The visits of the team took place from 14 November to 16 November 2012 and from 12 February to 15 February 2013, respectively. MRU provided the team with some additional documentation between the visits.

The team consisted of:

- Professor Ferdinand Devínsky, former Rector of Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia (chair)
- Professor Hannele Niemi, former Vice-Rector of University of Helsinki, Finland
- Professor Philippe Rousseau, former President of the University Lille III, France
- Julian Hiller, student representative, Leibniz University Hannover, Germany
- Alicja Bochajczuk, EUA – IEP Secretariat, Belgium (team coordinator)

The team is grateful for the hospitality shown by the university, the excellent organisation of the two visits as well as the open and frank atmosphere that Rector, prof. Alvydas Pumputis and his team created. The team thanks Mrs Gedrute Račienė and her team for organising the two visits to Mykolas Romeris in a very efficient manner and for preparing and providing the information requested by the team. The team is grateful to everyone who devoted their time to the meetings, gave the team their assistance and without whom our task could not have been completed.

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

### **2.1 Mission, vision and strategic planning**

The IEP methodology uses the university's mission and vision as a starting point in reviewing what the university is trying to do. The team noted that although in the SER the mission (not the vision) of the university is presented, these two crucial chapters are missing in the statute of the university.

The SER states the mission of the university: "to nurture academic traditions of the world, European and Lithuanian universities in accordance with the principles of democracy and respect for human values, to educate civic society ..." and as the strategic goal "to become an outstanding institution of HE belonging to the international network of universities carrying out high level research...".

The translation of mission into activities is presented in a document entitled "The 2010-2020 Strategic Activities Plan of the Mykolas Romeris University". Whilst the document described important goals and some very attractive projects — including 62 indicators of the implementation of the strategic activity plan — it lacks clear priorities and a detailed financial plan, which must be an inseparable part of each realistic strategic plan. To be an "outstanding HEI" or the "one of the best in Lithuania" require further elaboration, and concrete steps to reach these targets and the strategic goals are to be defined.

The team gained an impression that the university is attempting to do too much in an excessive number of areas in a relatively short time. Fortunately, through the discussions it became clear to the team that the MRU top management is aware of this and understands that the strategic plan should be tightly connected to the operational plan and financial planning of the university. Consequently, the team was pleased to receive, between the two visits a "Yearly plan for implementation of the Strategic Plan" together with some financial, material and human resources in place to achieve the objectives. This is a substantial step to fulfil the needs and development of the university and the team encourages the university to follow this path.

Commonly, an organisation can try to achieve its mission and vision through four strategic steps: identify a series of objectives or goals, put in place a plan to achieve these objectives or goals, put in place structures and processes through which to achieve these objectives and carry out activities that fulfil the objectives. The team believes that a more elaborate standalone mission and vision statement (in the form of e.g. an addendum to the statute) would certainly help to keep the university on the right track in the turbulent days of changes.

In view of the previous analysis, the team recommends the following:

- **Prepare a standalone mission and vision statement as a separate document attached to the university statute, serving as a framework for the preparation of mission statements of individual faculties which, while reflecting the specific character of individual subunits, would be consistent with the university's general mission.**
- **Seek a university-wide agreement on a few basic carefully-chosen priorities and attainable goals. Put in place a realistic financial plan with precise funding allocated to each project and operational plan listing structures, processes, human and financial resources through which to achieve these goals and efficient monitoring of whether the objectives are met. Keep in mind that the strategic plan should be reviewed and refined every year.**
- **Develop a communication plan that ensures that the university as a whole is aware of the strategic planning process so as to build trust and ownership.**

## **2.2 Governance and university structure**

Regarding the university structure MRU follows the law on higher education which states: "a state university must have the collegial management bodies — the council and the senate, as well as a sole management body — the rector" (art. 19). The team was presented a general frame of decision-making: proposals for decisions and new actions are presented in the meetings of the rectorate (consisting of the rector, vice-rectors, the chancellor, faculty deans, heads of institutes and a student delegate) which decides to submit a proposal to the relevant body. Depending on the type of issue it might be the rector, senate or council which takes a final decision.

The council was given a lot of power by the new Law on research and higher education introduced in 2009. It is composed of nine members, of whom one is appointed by the student representative body, four are appointed by the academic community and the other four members are appointed by the senate from the persons who do not belong to the staff and students of the university. These four members of the council are selected through open competition and appointed after the assessment of the Council of Higher Education.

Upon hearing the opinion of the senate, the council approves the university's vision, mission, strategic action plan presented by the rector; submits amendments of the Statute to the Seimas for approval, considers and approves plans for reorganisation of the structure of the university presented by the rector, sets the procedure of management of funds and assets of the university, sets the procedure of organisation of the election of the rector and elects and appoints to the office and dismisses from it the rector, sets the principles of selection and assessment of the administration and other employees of the university. Upon the recommendation of the rector, the council sets a tuition fee and the level of fees, approves the internal rules and procedures of the university.



The senate is the management body of academic affairs of the university, responsible for approving study programmes, internal system of quality assurance, setting qualification requirements for positions of teaching and research staff. Currently the senate consists of 34 members, out of which at least 20% are students. There are three commissions of the senate and consensus-based decision-making is preferred.

The rector heads the university, organises its activities, ensures the implementation of the strategic action plan of the university, issues orders which are binding to staff and students. The rector recruits and dismisses employees of the university, manages human resources, submits an annual strategic action plan and annual report on activities of the university.

There seems to be a culture of compromise at the university with decisions discussed until a consensus is found. The team was told that there are a high number of informal meetings led by vice-rectors with participation of vice-deans, personnel of the central administration. Similarly, at faculty level deans, vice-deans, heads of departments and other employees of administration discuss and consult each other on common issues concerning particular faculties.

#### *Role of the students in governance*

The Bologna Process underlines that involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed. It affirms that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, their participation in all decision-making processes must be secured.

The role of students in governance of MRU is, according to the team's view, consistent with the aims of the Bologna Process: students are involved in institutional governance at all levels (council, senate, rectorate, faculty councils, study programme committees etc.). The team appreciated that the students are positive about their role in the decision-making processes and governance of the university, though some of them complained about the lack of information from the central units. **The team encourages the university to further create and support a students' participation culture using formal and informal mechanisms aiming to have a strong participation of students in the university decision-making processes at all levels, if possible with voting rights.**

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Declarations/PRAGUE\\_COMMUNIQUE.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Declarations/PRAGUE_COMMUNIQUE.pdf)

## 2.3 Human resources and financial management

### *Human resources management*

The academic staff of the university is relatively young with an average age of 41 years. The university management explained that great effort had been made in the past years increasing the number of staff members (the number of professors increased from 34 to 70, docents from 157 to 261) who will respond to the needs of constantly developing institution. The team learnt that many teachers are not employed exclusively as full-time teachers at MRU and are engaged at other universities and in professional fields as well. The team gained an impression that the people whom they met during the interviews seem to be satisfied to be employees of the university.

Academics are admitted to their posts by the rector according to regulations on selection and promotion of academic and administrative staff. All staff members are admitted to their posts by public tender competitions and promoted by the rector, following proposals of the recruitment commission, after an evaluation of employees' qualifications which is carried out using established criteria. With respect to periodical assessment of staff the team was reported that administrative staff members are evaluated once a year through a questionnaire distributed to the heads of departments. Academic staff members are evaluated through the new salary system and additional assessment procedures. The team was told that — theoretically — poor performers are offered staff development and career advice but that, as a matter of practice, this has not been the case. The processes to evaluate the governance of the university are under development.

Since June 2011, MRU has introduced a new salary system which is believed to ensure a higher quality of studies, research and improved academic achievements. Salaries of the staff consist of a fixed component and a variable component, which is calculated by use of defined criteria including mostly involvement in research, designing new study programmes, creating joint studies. The team realises the importance of such a system for the institution and advises the university **to work on creating a common understanding of the need to maintain the system, on improving the transparency of the criteria and the broader understanding of the functionality of the system to ensure that it does not overburden the staff with additional bureaucratic work. The team advises that the new salary system which is in fact a performance-based reward system should be further implemented for all categories of employees of the university.** This system should also serve to support staff development and encourage the improvement of poorer performers — the fact that the research-active individuals have a possibility to get up to a higher salary as a reward for high research production serves undoubtedly as an incentive for others.

### *Financial management*

According to the SER, the university draws its funding from various sources: the state budget, EU Structural Funds, Research Council of Lithuania, international mobility programmes and projects and, foremost, the tuition fees.

The institution enjoys autonomy from the state financing — state budget funds, received in 2011, amounted to 24.2% of the total income. The representatives of MRU emphasised that the university is relatively independent from the state funds and that it's a desired situation which allows greater financial flexibility. On the other hand, the SER mentions that the negative demographic trends and decreasing state support may form a permanent danger to all institutions in Lithuania.

The SER and additional documents requested by the team provided no sufficient data on the financial situation at the university. The team was made aware that the university is in relatively good financial shape. Nevertheless, as there is no plan for mastering the incoming and non-avoidable threats **the team recommends MRU to elaborate a comprehensive plan supporting the increase of income from e.g. external contracts and international grants.**

Furthermore, **the team encourages the university to establish an alumni centre and start a nation-wide campaign to address the stakeholders and university alumni as well, with the goal to collect funds for the university.**

### 3. Teaching and learning

One of the goals in the university development plan is the continuity of *curricular reform* effectively transforming the existing study courses and introducing a portfolio of new academic programs in line with the law, current education trends and the Bologna recommendations. MRU has made important efforts to achieve a formal implementation of the Bologna cycles and introduction of ECTS. In its visits to five faculties and one department and during discussions with the deans, vice-deans, with members of the academic staff and students, the team appreciated the dedicated and focused efforts from all actors to re-design both Bachelor and Master curricula and to improve teaching and learning in general. However, it was brought to the team's attention that some staff members still have difficulties with the implementation of some aspects of the reforms and need to be supported, e.g. in terms of recognition of ECTS gained by students while studying abroad.

According to the SER, all study programmes are learning outcomes based with defined learning activities and student workload consistent with the number of credits allocated to components. There is an ECTS study programme catalogue accessible online and, during the second visit, the team learned that the university had been awarded with the ECTS label in December 2012.

**The team encourages MRU to continue its work on the full implementation of the Bologna Process and ECTS across the whole institution, and while doing this to pay particular attention in providing further support and advice to staff members so to ensure that they are fully equipped to fulfil their (sometimes new) responsibilities.**

The team was informed that *designing new study programmes* is one of the core objectives of the university with respect to its teaching and learning activities. The 2012 Activity Implementation Plan (part of Strategic Plan 2010 - 2020) envisaged preparation of 16 new study programmes and two specialisations particularly in the fields of economics, computer science, philosophy, management and business administration. Launching new joint study programmes (preparation and implementation of 17 joint study programmes) was also repeatedly underlined as one of the top priorities of the institution.

The fact that the university attempts to actively respond to the market needs and demands of the changing environment is commendable. However, the team came to realise that some of the programmes don't offer enough original substance and sometimes overlap in terms of content or leading staff. The team therefore emphasises that **designing and introducing new programmes must respond to the needs of students, the labour market and especially to the profile of the university. There should be some rationale of introducing new programmes in terms of costs, interest expressed by the students and, for joint programmes, the partners that will commit themselves to a greater extent. At the same time, the university should strive towards increased flexibility of the existing study programmes.**

Regarding pedagogic and scientific coordination, the team felt that across the university, curriculum issues seem to be mostly a matter of individual scientific/educational bodies. The team believes that there is some room for improvement regarding coordination between courses. As a very limited inter-faculty cooperation was observed, **the team recommends a permeation of faculty boundaries so that more exchange and collaboration between the faculties take place and urges the university to develop joint programmes that extend beyond these boundaries.** It would enhance the programme offerings as well as increase the attractiveness of the programmes. The university needs to lower the barriers for change and open its faculties within the university to create a common sense of belonging.

As far as the *student-centred learning* approach is concerned, the team noted that the SER placed emphasis on MRU's commitment to focus on learning and reduce teaching with the goal to introduce innovative, diverse and flexible teaching and assessment methods. Discussions with students, and also with staff showed a variable situation. It was indicated that the level of innovation or use of new approaches could be more widespread. The team would add here that a genuine implementation of student-centred learning also requires changing the attitudes of the student population as well as the staff.

As for the academic staff, the team believes that an appropriate and effective training is required to achieve this aim. The SER states that a system of qualification improvement for academic staff, administrative staff and other employees is implemented, and various training activities take place at MRU. However, after closely analysing this matter, the team came to the conclusion that there's no professional centre for teaching excellence and a system for improving teachers' skills and proficiency in teaching is in developing stage. In the times of changing environment and extreme competition on the higher education market **the university is encouraged to devote more time and resources to promote and improve teaching effectiveness and student learning, train the teaching staff, communicate the importance of teaching and learning to both internal and external audiences, serve as a catalyst for learning-centred education and help academic units develop and assess innovative approaches and methods.** On another note, **the teachers can be encouraged to exchange information and experiences through a series of study visits which could be organised with partner universities,** where they can be presented with different models for organising their teaching, developing quality culture in line with the ESGs and offered insight into current issues in the academic and scientific realms.

#### *Academic staff*

As already mentioned, the academic staff of the university is relatively young, since the average age of teachers is 41 years and it has remained nearly unchanged during recent years.

While the IEP team had the opportunity to witness the dedication and commitment of the academic staff of the MRU, its attention was drawn to the increasing teaching workload for

some parts of the staff, which in turn does not leave room for research and competence development despite the efforts of the academic staff.

The team would like to stress **the need for the leadership of the MRU at all levels to ensure a balance between research and teaching obligations of the academic staff, by reviewing in detail the teachers' workload.**

Moreover, **the team recommends that MRU should very carefully identify the learning outcomes for each course. Involving external specialists and foreign teachers in teaching at the university could help make the courses more attractive from the practical point of view.**

These actions will create some space for teaching staff to engage in other activities, such as research. However, if the workload is too low (i.e. 80 hours/year) it should be balanced.

### *Students*

During their visits, the IEP team met a range of students from various disciplines and from different levels of study, both from campuses in Vilnius and in Kaunas. Students spoke highly of facilities of the university, learning resources, access and equipment of the library and IT facilities, and the MRU online platform. The IEP team was reassured that these provided good support for learners.

The university seems to enjoy a very high reputation amongst both students and the external partners of the university. The team identified a general appreciation by students of the commitment of the teaching staff and this seems to be a very important part of a high degree of satisfaction expressed by students regarding the university. The impression of the team is that the students are in general satisfied with their studies, teachers, the university as a whole, and employment opportunities. They are also satisfied with the level of their involvement and participation in university governance.

However, the team would like to emphasise one issue that was raised in all meetings with students. It has to do with the students' need for practical experience and development of personal skills, including also entrepreneurial skills. These should be considered a necessary complement to the theoretical courses, which currently prevail in the study programmes. Thus, **the team encourages this need to develop the practical competences of students to be taken into account to a larger extent while redesigning the curricula and the corresponding learning outcomes.** Student training, besides the subject content, should include the development of soft (in other words transferable) skills: presentations, team work, drafting of CV and other job seeking and professional life related skills.

*Lifelong learning and distance learning*

According to the SER, the university is one of the first in Lithuania to have started developing conditions for lifelong learning in conformity to the trends prevailing in Europe and rest of the world. A system for the acknowledgement and assessment of the achievements of non-formal learning and self-learning has been designed by the university, and distance studies have been increasingly developed. Nevertheless, it still seems to be an area insufficiently exploited by the university. The possible shortage of students in the future (due to demographical trends) and MRU's aspiration to provide a service to the community could perhaps be partly solved by offering distance education and life-long learning. The team therefore believes that by placing the development of lifelong learning culture at MRU and in the region very high among the institutional priorities, the leadership of the university could gain strategic advantage. As nowadays this type of service is also provided by private institutions/companies **the team recommends that MRU continues to explore how to cater the demands of non-traditional learners by developing lifelong learning and part-time courses, not just for whole programmes, but also subjects of interest to the community. It is also suggested that it addresses the challenges of designing and implementing e-learning and courses in as many departments as possible.** Establishing internet-based virtual training courses and distance learning for the employees of the local companies may create new student markets.

## **4. Quality culture**

In recent years quality has become a growing concern in higher education for policy makers and institutions. This has led to a rise in quality assurance mechanisms that aim both at self-improvement and accountability purposes. Therefore, one of the major aims of the IEP process is to help institutions develop a stronger quality culture.

In Lithuania external quality assurance policy in HE is implemented by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), an independent public agency which exercises exclusive right of making the final decision on programme accreditation.

MRU implements an internal quality assurance system based on shared responsibility for the quality of studies (shared by students and university teachers, faculties/institutes/departments, other academic units), anchored in Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). There are many elements of ESG applied at MRU, and the team received a report on how these guidelines are followed.

Quality assurance activities fall under the responsibility of the Vice-Rector for Education. It was evident to the team, however, that not all elements of the ESG Part 1 are in place, most notably an overarching university policy for quality assurance. Moreover, the Strategic Plan states that forming a comprehensive system for quality assurance is one of the priorities of the institution since such a system hasn't been fully developed and integrated yet.

Formally, monitoring and revision of study programmes are conducted by study programmes committees (SPC). Each study programme has its SPC which consists of members of academic staff of the programme, students and social partners. The committees are responsible, among others, for quality of the curriculum of the study programme and the study process. One of the most important sources of information about quality of studies at the university is online feedback provided by the students in a form of students' questionnaires:

- on the chosen study programme
- on quality of teaching on the given study subject.

The team was informed that the study programme committees analyse the survey results and use the findings for self-analysis of the programme and for creating measures to improve the quality of studies. Despite these processes, the students in some parts of the university reported on an uneven teaching quality and mentioned that some demotivated teachers are left to their own devices. Since their introduction the response rate of the questionnaires is not satisfactory and this has become a matter of concern to the university — the students are not active and motivated enough to fill out the forms, which are available online and completed on a voluntary basis. Some of them reported that there is no clear feedback from the institution and they are usually not informed if there is any action taken after they respond to the survey. It was difficult also for the team to identify how student evaluation of teachers and programmes are fed into the processes in a reliable and valid manner. On the



other hand, at some faculties the teachers are given full results of assessment from the survey. If there are major remarks on teacher's work, the issue is discussed and improvement or change of methods is advised; the team was told that if the teacher refuses to change his or her style the contracts are not prolonged. No record of such cases has been made at the university.

The quality assurance processes at faculty and department levels are exercised also in a more informal way: regular meetings with faculty staff and authorities with the students, conversations with the students after the classes; some teachers present their own adapted, individual surveys disseminated during the courses.

In a quality assurance and enhancement system feedback is a crucial issue. In the team's view, there is clear evidence of willingness to monitor the quality of teaching and to ensure the quality of the QA mechanisms at the university. To reinforce the process, **the team encourages MRU to ensure that the outcomes of QA interventions are communicated to staff and students so the feedback loop is closed and usefulness of QA is demonstrated. It recommends the university to review on an ongoing basis and improving the student questionnaire.** Two principles are important in this respect: the teachers must feel some ownership of the process in order to bring about real improvement and students must be informed about the use of the questionnaires and the decisions made from the results. A way of combining both principles would be to send the questionnaire results to the teachers, who would analyse them and explain to their students what changes were brought about as a result of their feedback.

Regarding the quality assurance and enhancement as a whole and keeping in mind that it is always the institution itself which is the main actor of the QA processes, the team suggests the university to reflect upon its views on quality assessment and enhancement and the possibility of seeing it more as an instrument of self-improvement in full alignment with the university's values on education and research. The result will be crucial to future prospects not only of QA activities of the institution but in broader sense also for MRU.

Therefore it is very important to educate all the actors involved of the importance of participation in the quality processes and communicate the expectation that it is everybody's role to ensure and enhance quality of all the activities of the university in order to develop the so called ownership of QA.<sup>3</sup> In relation to the above, **the team encourages the university to focus on creating quality culture as a bottom-up approach spread within the institution, as a holistic approach focused not only on monitoring, but also improving.**

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<sup>3</sup> After Andrée Sursock, Examining Quality Culture Part II: Processes and Tools – Participation, Ownership and Bureaucracy, European University Association 2011  
[http://www.eua.be/pubs/Examining\\_Quality\\_Culture\\_Part\\_II.pdf](http://www.eua.be/pubs/Examining_Quality_Culture_Part_II.pdf)

**The team also recommends the creation of an efficient central office of quality management, which would oversee and coordinate the internal QA procedures and prepare annual reports.** Introducing the quality assurance system in the university at all levels and training the faculty staff responsible for quality assurance would help the university to monitor itself and to improve the processes. A centrally directed and integrated quality assurance system will ensure that a quality culture is gradually established involving the quality consciousness of all members of the university, in order to ensure that at university level there is a complete picture of quality across all aspects of provision.

## 5. Research

Carrying out high level research belongs to strategic goals of the university, as mentioned in the Strategic Plan: "the university aims to become an internationally-minded university, reliably established in the international academic space. In this area the university develops fundamental and applied research, takes part in national, regional and international scientific research programmes and projects."

However, the *importance of research activities* was not addressed frequently enough by the representatives of the institution during the meetings. It was also scarcely mentioned in the SWOT analysis provided in the SER and the team was not presented with research strategy/policy documents of the university if such exist. The self-evaluation group explained that research at the university was at first discipline-based, conducted on the level of departments, but in recent years a more interdisciplinary approach has been taken. It was considered to be a major step forward. In 2010 the senate established an interdisciplinary priority research area for 2010-2014 entitled "Societal innovations for global growth" with five major research programmes: justice, security and human rights, social technologies, national sustainable growth in the context of globalisation, improving the quality of life and advancing employment opportunities, continuity and change of values in global society. However, the team got the impression that interfaculty cooperation in the field of research should be further strengthened. To pursue this path and further boost and properly organise research activities at the university, it is highly recommended that the university promotes research to be one of the highest priorities in its strategy. It would be very helpful **to prepare a university wide research strategy paper stating clear research priorities and envisaging the development of research at MRU taking into account the following directions:**

- the strategy and priorities should define how research is related to the educational process, in order to ensure that research activity results in research-based education and teaching
- the strategy should emphasise the need of a shift in thinking towards a more collaborative approach and a creative interaction of teaching and research, fostering collaboration between different university units to attempt to generate critical mass in research.

As far as *managerial and financial aspects of research activities* are concerned, the team felt that there is a significant lack of leadership in research, though MRU has many outstanding academics that have a vast experience in international research and publish in top journals. It would be useful to the MRU **to further search for top research teams and top research individuals to support them adequately. The team would also like to suggest that vacancies should be filled according to strategic priorities and the recruitment of new research staff targeted in prioritised areas.** With regard to quality of research, some steps have been already taken to assess the output of research (by reports prepared by leader of each research programme to verify that the strategy is working and prepare further developments). This path should be further pursued in the future in order to ensure that high quality research is delivered, and that quality assurance processes also cover research activities.

With regard to the financial side of research activities, the team noted the fact that only approx. 17.2% of MRU's total budget was assigned to research in 2012. **The team recommends that the university takes a more active role in acquiring research funds from abroad, aims higher in terms of European research projects,** focusing specifically on the prestigious 7th Framework Programme projects, the upcoming Horizon 2020 plan of the European Union as well the European Research Council grants. Acquiring funding from these sources would enable the university to pay more competitive salaries and boost its international visibility in the field of research. To further support research activities at the university the team recommends **the introduction of a seed money scheme for research at MRU and using the university's own funding to support, in particular, young researchers via its own internal research grant system.** The team further recommends fostering a supportive environment for research by for instance strengthening the research centre, in order to help researchers in preparing and fundraising for their projects, especially in the EU context.

With respect to PhD studies at the university, the team observed a low involvement of students in research and a very low number of PhD students' research activities. It is a matter of concern that PhD students form only 0.8% of all MRU students (169 PhD students out of 20,993 students in 2011/2012). MRU has the right to provide doctoral studies in 6 fields of science: law, management, psychology, education, economy, and philology. . The doctoral studies at the university have a short history: according to the Strategic Plan, the university first started implementing doctoral studies in the field of law, and the first dissertations on management and administration were defended in 2007. The first doctoral candidates in the field of psychology were admitted in 2007. As recent years have seen a slight decline in the number of doctoral candidates due to decreased funding allocated for doctoral studies in all schools of higher education of Lithuania, **the team advises that the university takes measures to further advertise and increase the number of PhD students through its own grants and scholarship schemes.** This would also contribute to enriching the pool of young researchers.

As far as undergraduate students' involvement in research is concerned, the team identified that research is not recognised as a component of study programmes. **The team therefore recommends that the university aims at strengthening and growing the research culture at the university by reaching out to undergraduates and communicating undergraduate research opportunities.** Classroom knowledge is reinforced and more completely assimilated when students are given the opportunity to apply that knowledge. Research invariably leads to a better understanding of and a deeper appreciation for the discipline under investigation and students' career goals are usually clarified after they participate in research.

## **6. Internationalisation**

Internationalisation is another aspect that has gained increasing visibility among European universities' strategic priorities. The current trends in higher education clearly underline this necessity and the move towards a more integrated higher education framework in Europe. Consequently, growing mobility among students and staff is likely to become a central issue for many universities, especially within the European Higher Education Area.

MRU is aware of this state of affairs and considers internationalisation as a strategic aspect with priorities such as increasing international mobility of the students and teachers and creating joint study programmes. It's evidenced by:

- developing joint programmes with the universities from other countries
- a significant number of established national and international partnerships
- membership in professional international organisations

Mobility is one of the crucial points of the Bologna Process. By 1 July 2010, 63 bilateral cooperation agreements were signed by MRU with universities from 37 countries (Erasmus bilateral agreements are not included). However, not all of the agreements are active, and international mobility of outgoing students remains rather low. With respect to participation in the Erasmus programme, the feedback from the students is diverse: some students are satisfied with the programme, some complain that not all the courses are recognised (i.e in law) or there is not enough financial support for Erasmus students (as the scholarships do not cover all the expenses incurred abroad). For many students there is a language barrier which is an obstacle, though there is a well functioning language centre at the university with free access for all students.

The team understands that the creation and successful implementation of joint programmes is given a top priority in internationalisation (and one of the top priorities of the institution as a whole). The initiative for creating such a programme comes from faculties when potential partners with compatible background are found and approximately 15 students are required for a programme to be launched and considered sustainable. Nowadays, there are a few joint studies on Master level at MRU; according to the Strategic Plan all Masters study programmes will be implemented as joint study programmes in the future with doctoral studies included in the system as well. Further recommendation on new programmes are included in the chapter "Teaching and learning" of this report.

In order to further strengthen its internationalisation and increase student and staff mobility, the team recommends MRU to take the following steps:

- **Enhance international exchanges by eliminating the possible barriers to mobility, such as e.g. the possible limited programme flexibility and financial obstacles. The university should ensure the transferability of ECTS credits from abroad across the**

**school so that as few students as possible would need to take additional examinations upon their return to the university, even with regard to more specialised courses. Develop a central approach to offer organisational and financial support to the students who are motivated to go abroad.**

- **Revise the numerous agreements with foreign partners from the perspective of their contribution to enhancement of mobility, research and teaching quality. If the agreements do not contribute to these university goals or have never been active, they can be terminated.**
- **Develop an international strategy with clear priorities (such as targeted countries). Many of the current problems could potentially be solved by an explicit university level strategy for international relations while without a good and efficient strategic plan it may be difficult to achieve institution's high targets.**

## **7. Service to society**

This relationship with their external environment is one of the dimensions of universities' mission that has been receiving increasing attention in recent years.

The university is strongly committed to its region and is perceived as having a very positive contribution to the local environment. The team met a number of external stakeholders (representatives of the Supreme Court, the Appeal Court, NGOs operating in Lithuania, financial organisations, representatives of ministries, State Tax Inspectorate etc.) who were very positive about MRU. They mentioned that the community looks positively at the university and its ambition to fulfil the needs for specialists of social sciences, law and humanities and "in the sector of civil service corresponding to the highest professional requirements". The stakeholders use the academic potential of the university by inviting trainees and organising students' placements. The cooperation is mutually beneficial: students gain practical knowledge, deepen their experience, establish contacts outside the university that may work in the future. The stakeholders receive valuable support in their performance and receive input from the university on the latest academic developments in particular fields. Stakeholders are involved in the governance and contribute to revision of study programmes, e.g. in faculty/institute councils at least one member is an external stakeholder, on a study programme committee one to two members are external stakeholders.

When it comes to the question of formalising cooperation with the environment, it seems that the university cooperates with stakeholders on many levels, but a lot of existing collaborations are the result of individual ad-hoc initiatives. The experience of many institutions indicates that it is not the most adequate for an institution that wants to regard this dimension of service to society as an important part of its activities.

Relations with alumni are another important area for improvement. This group can be a source of support and feedback for the university's activities and can help the university to develop its mission more effectively. Alumni can also provide important additional sources of revenue, either through donations or as a network for disseminating lifelong learning activities. However, the team considers that this requires a much greater effort and institutional support in order to develop a long-term relationship.

The team recommends that the **community stakeholder involvement should be further enhanced both at the curricular development level in different faculties as well as in the governance of the institution and the university should strengthen its connections with the local community, alumni and regional business and industry in a more formal way**. The meeting with stakeholders pointed to the underlying potential and their willingness to contribute to the university development and its regional presence.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the evaluation team praises MRU for its commitment to teaching quality and its aspiration to develop further its research culture and its international activities. Over the last years, the university has proved that it can adapt to new challenges in the fields of teaching and learning. The team is encouraged by the activities which have been initiated in the last years and makes its recommendations in the spirit of support and the expectation of more positive developments. It is important to pursue the main targets such as: setting clear university-wide priorities, creating ownership of actions and outcomes and strengthening research. The importance of effective internal communication at the university cannot be overemphasised.

In summary, the team wishes to highlight the key recommendations in the following six areas.

### **8.1 Governance and institutional decision-making**

- Prepare a standalone mission and vision statement as a separate document attached to the university statute, serving as a framework for the preparation of mission statements of individual faculties which, while reflecting the specific character of individual subunits, would be consistent with the university's general mission.
- Seek a university-wide agreement on a few basic carefully-chosen priorities and attainable goals. Put in place a realistic financial plan with precise funding allocated to each project and operational plan listing structures, processes, human and financial resources through which to achieve these goals and efficient monitoring of whether the objectives are met. Keep in mind that the strategic plan should be reviewed and refined every year.
- Develop a communication plan that ensures that the university as a whole is aware of the strategic planning process so as to build trust and ownership.
- Further create and support students' participation culture using formal and informal mechanisms aiming to have a strong participation of students in the university decision-making processes at all levels, if possible with voting right.
- Work on creating a common understanding of the need to maintain the new salary system, on improving the transparency of the criteria and the broader understanding of the functionality of the system to ensure that it does not overburden the staff with additional bureaucratic work. The new salary system which is in fact a performance-based reward system should be implemented for all categories of employees of the university.
- Elaborate a comprehensive plan supporting the increase of income from e.g. external contracts and international grants.
- Establish an alumni centre and start a national and international-wide campaign to address the whole population and all firms and contact university alumni as well, with the goal to collect funds for the university.



## **8.2 Teaching and learning**

- Continue work on the full implementation of the Bologna Process and ECTS across the whole institution, and while doing this to pay particular attention in providing further support and advice to staff members to ensure that they are fully equipped to fulfil their (sometimes new) responsibilities.
- Designing and introducing new programmes must respond to the needs of students, the labour market and especially to the profile of the university. There should be some rationale of introducing new programmes in terms of costs, interest expressed by the students and, for joint programmes, the partners that will commit themselves to a greater extent. At the same time, the university should strive towards increased flexibility of the existing study programmes.
- Permeate the faculty boundaries so that more exchange and collaboration between the faculties take place; develop joint programmes that extend beyond these boundaries.
- Devote more time and resources to promote and improve teaching effectiveness and student learning, train the teaching staff, communicate the importance of teaching and learning to both internal and external audiences, serve as a catalyst for learning-centred education and help academic units develop and assess innovative approaches and methods.
- Encourage teachers to exchange information and experiences through a series of study visits which could be organised with partner universities.
- Ensure a balance between research and teaching obligations of the academic staff by reviewing in detail the teachers' workload.
- Carefully identify the learning outcomes for each course. Involving external specialists and foreign teachers in teaching at the university to help make the courses more attractive from the practical point of view.
- Take students' need for practical experience and development of personal skills into account, including entrepreneurial skills. Consider the development of transferable skills a necessary complement to the theoretical courses, which prevail in the study programmes. The need to develop the practical competences of students is to be considered in redesigning the curricula and the corresponding learning outcomes.
- Continue to explore how to cater to the demands of non-traditional learners by developing lifelong learning and part-time courses, not just for whole programmes, but also subjects of interest to the community. Addresses the challenges of designing and implementing e-learning and courses in as many departments as possible.

## **8.3 Quality culture**

- Ensure that the outcomes of QA interventions are communicated to staff and students so the feedback loop is closed and usefulness of QA is demonstrated. Review on an ongoing basis and improve the student questionnaires.

- Focus on creating quality culture as a bottom-up approach across the institution, as a holistic approach focused not only on monitoring, but also improving.
- Create an efficient central office of quality management, which would oversee and coordinate the internal QA procedures and prepare annual reports.

#### **8.4 Research**

- Prepare a university wide research strategy paper stating clear research priorities and envisaging the development of research at MRU taking into account the below directions:
  - the strategy and priorities should define how research is related to the educational process, in order to ensure that research activity results in research-based education and teaching
  - the strategy should emphasize the need of shift of thinking towards more collaborative approach and a creative interaction of teaching and research, fostering collaboration between different university units to attempt to generate critical mass in research.
- Further search for top research teams and top research individuals to support them adequately. Vacancies should be filled according to strategic priorities and the recruitment of new research staff targeted in prioritised areas.
- Strengthen support service for the Research Centre, in order to help the researchers technically prepare their projects, especially EU ones.
- Take a more active role in acquiring research funds from abroad, aim higher in terms of European research projects.
- Introduce a seed money scheme for research at MRU and using the university's own funding to support young researchers, in particular, via its own internal research grant system.
- Take measures to further advertise and increase the number of PhD students through the university's own grants and scholarship schemes.
- Aim at strengthening and growing the research culture at the university by reaching out to undergraduates and communicating undergraduate research opportunities.

#### **8.5 Internationalisation**

- Enhance international exchanges by eliminating the possible barriers to mobility, such as e.g. the possible limited programme flexibility and financial obstacles. Ensure the transferability of ECTS credits from abroad across the school so that as few students as possible would need to take additional examinations upon their return to the university, even with regard to more specialised courses. Develop a central approach to offer organisational and financial support to the students who are motivated to go abroad.
- Revise the numerous agreements with foreign partners from the perspective of their contribution to enhancement of mobility, research and teaching quality. If the

agreements do not contribute to these university goals or have never been active, they can be terminated.

- Develop an international strategy with clear priorities (such as targeted countries). Many of the current problems could potentially be solved by an explicit university level strategy for international relations while without a good and efficient strategic plan it may be difficult to achieve the institution's high targets.

#### **8.6 Service to society**

- Further enhance community stakeholder involvement both at the curricular development level in different faculties as well as in the governance of the institution and the university should strengthen its connections with the local community, alumni and regional business and industry in a more formal way.

### **Envoi**

The team has enjoyed learning about the unique characteristics and distinctive role of Mykolas Romeris University. Team members will look with special interest at the university's future development. It has been a pleasure to discuss with staff, students, and stakeholders the challenges faced by MRU, and efforts to address constraints and to explore future opportunities.

Based on what the team has seen during the evaluation process, it remains confident that the university could successfully meet the challenges it is now facing in a constantly changing environment. The team feels that MRU is moving in the right direction and hope that this progress will continue and intensify.