

**Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
(TSU)**

EVALUATION REPORT

August 2022

Team:

Jānis Vētra, Chair

Anja Oskamp

Jordi Villà Freixa

Michał Goszczyński

Raymond Smith, Team Coordinator

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Governance and institutional decision-making	7
3	Quality culture	11
4	Teaching and learning	13
5	Research	17
6	Service to society	21
7	Internationalisation	24
8	Conclusion	26
	Summary of Recommendations	26

Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU). The evaluation took place during two on-line visits in April and June 2022.

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 participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of IEP are:

- a strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase;
- a European and international perspective;
- a peer-review approach; and
- support for improvement.

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

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

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

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

1.2 *Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University’s (TSU) profile*

1.2.1 No university, wherever it is situated, operates without needing to address the challenges of its national and international context. In the case of TSU, established in 1918, it is regarded as the pre-eminent public university in Georgia, and this brings with it wide ranging national obligations. This is a challenge it gladly accepts and it is manifestly proud to sustain and help develop many aspects of national culture, history and language, even to the extent of maintaining academic programmes that, in objective terms, are uneconomic. It has few problems with student recruitment and the team was advised that one in four higher education applications in Georgia are made to TSU. The Rector of TSU

is Chairman of the Permanent Conference of Rectors of Georgia¹ and therefore plays a leading role in interactions with the national government and parliament in developing and helping to improve the efficacy of the higher education eco-system in Georgia. For the senior leadership of TSU this is a significant and serious part of the university's mission.

1.2.2 Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University is a comprehensive university sitting in the tier of public universities that are designated as 'research' institutions². It has a student population of nearly 24,000 students spread across all three cycles of study and these students are taught and supported within 7 faculties³. Student numbers are largest in the faculties of Economy and Business and Humanities. Undergraduates comprise a significant majority of students at over 20,000 enrolments with masters and doctoral together forming less than 14% of the total student population. These masters / doctoral numbers might be regarded as relatively low for a research intensive institution, although this percentage is slightly higher than the national average⁴. Academic staff levels (full-time and 'invited') allow for an encouraging student: staff ratio of 10:1. Broad research activity takes place in the faculties and more intensively in the 16 Independent Research Institutes that occupy a unique position within the TSU organisational structure.

1.2.3 The wider international context for the higher education sector in Georgia is framed largely by the country's relationship with the EU. Candidate membership of the EU continues to be pursued and there was some encouragement for this in June 2022 when the EU Commission recommended that Georgia be given the 'perspective' to become a member of the European Union. On this basis, Georgia will be granted candidate status once a number of priorities have been addressed. Notwithstanding this medium to long term ambition of Georgia to become a full member of the EU, the higher education sector in Georgia is already operating according to the principles and frameworks of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). And, as the SER notes, TSU 'states in its values that it shares the ideals promoted by the Magna Charta Universitatum of European Universities'.

1.2.4 While the adoption of EHEA principles and frameworks offers a sound platform for the development of higher education in Georgia, the lack of funding of public universities through the national budget and broader structural weaknesses in the national economy e.g. low salary levels in the public sector and a lack of industrial development in comparison to many other countries in Europe⁵, constrain TSU's ability to progress its vision and mission, especially in terms of investment in human capital and in its infrastructure. Against this difficult financial and economic background public universities in Georgia are also facing increasing competition from a growing number of private HE institutions. Indeed, private universities now form a clear majority of HE institutions (55 of 75) enrolling around 35% of all students⁶. Even TSU, as a leading public university, suffers from this competition; on the one hand it takes seriously its wider obligations to the nation's culture and heritage and this, as has been noted, does not come cost free, while on the other hand, it is unable to set realistic tuition fee levels because of an outdated national funding model and this is exacerbated

¹ The Permanent Conference of Rectors has recently become a collective full member of the EUA.

² The other categories are 'teaching' universities (no doctoral programmes and limited research function) and 'colleges' (first cycle studies only and no research footprint).

³ The TSU faculties are: Economy and Business; Exact and Natural Sciences; Law; Medicine; Social and Political Sciences; Psychology and Educational Sciences; Humanities.

⁴ *Technical Assistance to Support Reforms to the Higher Education Financing System in Georgia, 2018*, Report by the World Bank.

⁵ '[C]ritical structural challenges remain, particularly weak productivity and the need to create high-quality jobs. Many Georgians remain in rural areas engaged in low productivity agriculture. Measures of human capital continue to be weak, with poor learning outcomes and a lack of linkages between education and private sector needs.' *World Bank Overview*.

⁶ Given the population of Georgia - 3.7 million - this places the country at the very top end of the European spectrum when counting numbers of HEIs per million inhabitants. This also has an impact on sector efficiency.

by legislative restrictions on its autonomy which, in many respects, hinder effective governance of the institution.

1.3 The evaluation process

1.3.1 The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a group of 10 TSU staff representing faculties and research institutes. The process commenced in October 2021 and involved the creation of a number of working groups, with the main focus of their work being the six areas identified by the IEP self-evaluation guide for institutions, i.e. institutional governance and decision-making, quality culture, learning and teaching etc. The TSU Quality Assurance Service (QAS) provided important co-ordinating and support functions during the period of the self-evaluation.

1.3.2 Engagement with the IEP process and subsequent consideration of the draft Self-Evaluation Report (SER) by TSU academic and administrative staff is described in the SER as ‘positive’ and ‘beneficial’ with discussions across groups found to be especially valuable. Comments from the various university constituencies were incorporated in preliminary drafts of the SER and a consolidated version was circulated to the Rector, Vice-Rectors and Chancellor for final amendments before finalisation of the document by the TSU Quality Assurance Service. The university’s Academic Council was briefed on the SER by the head of the Quality Assurance Service in March 2022. The team finds the SER to be clear, well-structured and comprehensive while also revealing a high level of institutional self-awareness.

1.3.3 In discussion with members of the self-evaluation group (SEG), the team was advised that TSU is accustomed to external reviews, at both institutional and programme levels, and it made sense to utilise previously used methodologies when approaching the IEP process. The SEG reaffirmed the valuable learning aspects of the process as described in the SER and touched on the difficulties of involving students in the various debates and discussions that formed part of the internal IEP engagement. The team also notes the weaknesses, as stated in the SER, in drawing down comprehensive institutional data to support the analysis of the performance of the university viz. ‘because the university is so big and data collection is not always systematized, it is not always easy to get the information in [a] short period of time from the number of units that are responsible for concrete data’⁷. The university’s plans to improve this aspect of the business and learning infrastructure are considered later in this report.

1.3.4 The team also notes that the SEG included the Vice-Rector for Research and a representative from the Research Institutes as befits a university that stresses its position as a research intensive institution, although the wider engagement of the Research Institutes with the IEP process was described to the team as being patchy. This aloofness of Research Institutes from the IEP engagement perhaps reflects the wider issue of their integration, or lack of integration, into the broader functioning of TSU.

1.3.5 The self-evaluation report of the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2022. The on-line visits of the evaluation team to Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University took place from 10th to 12th April and from 13th to 15th June 2022, respectively. In between the on-line visits Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

⁷ SER, page 3.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Professor Jānis Vētra, Riga Stradins University, formerly Chairman, Council of Higher Education, Latvia, team chair
- Professor Anja Oskamp, Open University of the Netherlands, formerly Rector, Open University of the Netherlands
- Professor Jordi Villà Freixa, Universitat de Vic - Universitat Central de Catalunya. Formerly vice-rector of research at the UVic-UCC and the UIC Barcelona, Spain
- Mr Michal Goszczynski, MA student, Warsaw University of Technology, Poland
- Dr Raymond Smith, formerly Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator

The team thanks the Rector, Dr George Sharvashidze, for his commitment to the IEP process and his kind consideration during our on-line visits.

The team also thanks the staff of TSU for their involvement in a wide range of meetings and in helping the team to understand the complex workings of the university. In particular, the team thanks Maia Gelashvili, our institutional liaison, her colleagues and the IEP Secretariat for the exemplary arrangements that helped to make the evaluation run smoothly and efficiently.

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

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 One of the recurring themes in the documentation sent to the IEP team, and also raised in many of the discussions that the team had with TSU staff at all levels, is the difficulty of governing and managing the university when institutional autonomy is circumscribed to the extent it is by national higher education law and ministerial decrees. This situation might seem a little counter intuitive given that in May 2017 a new article on academic freedom was integrated into the Georgian constitution. Amongst other things it states that ‘the freedom of intellectual creativity shall be guaranteed and that the right to intellectual property shall be inviolable’. However, the view of TSU in this debate is made very clear in the conclusion of the SER,

‘even though all public HEIs are autonomous...and this autonomy and academic freedom are guaranteed by the Constitution, in reality there are so many constraints implemented through the Law on Higher Education and various ministerial decrees, that public universities are very limited in their ability to form an effective and efficient governance model that would be suitable for the unique culture and circumstances of the university.’

2.2 Issues of institutional autonomy are not, of course, just confined to public universities in Georgia. Indeed the European University Association (EUA) has created a university autonomy tool that allows comparison of university autonomy across 29 countries. This is based on four dimensions - organisational; financial; staffing; academic⁸ - and their related indicators. And while TSU stresses organisational constraints on autonomy, it also highlights financial barriers to the effective delivery of its strategic aims, not least in the pay and conditions for academic staff. At the same time the lack of autonomy in relation to private universities places public universities at a competitive disadvantage both in the Georgian HE space and more widely in Europe and beyond. In the view of the team the EUA tool provides a useful basis for on-going internal reflection on the optimal shape of the university and the translation of this into a wider national debate on university autonomy⁹.

2.3 The team recognises the picture of the university’s complex and complicated structures and decision-making processes as described in the SER and views this as being in need of simplification both in vertical and horizontal terms. For example, TSU has both an Academic Council, chaired by the Rector, and a Council of Representatives (Senate) chaired by an elected Senator. The team understands that, on occasion, the two forums come together for discussion on specific topics. The membership of these two bodies is large, particularly in the case of the Senate which has 76 members when all positions are filled. At the time of the second on-line visit the Senate had over 20 vacancies, many of these for student representative positions. Whatever, the future configuration of the university’s governance structure it is important that the current arrangements operate to their fullest extent and the team *recommends that vacancies on the Senate are filled as soon as is practicable*.

2.4 It is also noteworthy that while the Senate includes students (a third of the total membership), the Academic Council only includes representatives from the faculties and the Research Institutes. The numbers involved in these forums would, in any circumstances, present problems of sensible discourse and effective decision-making. Joint sessions, from the team’s perspective, can only be more unwieldy. In discussion with Academic Council and Senate representatives the team heard differing views as to the relative importance of these two forums. The SER states that the Academic Council ‘creates and approves the strategic development plan of the university, approves faculty strategic

⁸ <https://www.university-autonomy.eu/>

⁹ No doubt this can offer synergies with the outcomes of a two-day international conference *The University Purpose and Institutional Autonomy: Challenges and their Impact on Georgia* organised by TSU and the East European University, in October 2021.

development plans and study programmes, discusses and approves other education and research related topics'. However, some Academic Council members advised the team that, in their view, there was a need for the Academic Council to focus more on strategic issues as opposed to the many routine matters that took up much of their time, for example, the approval of teaching programmes. Such strategic discussions might provide more focus on the future direction of doctoral education, the development of internationalisation in all its many dimensions and the financial implications of following certain strategic directions and priorities. The team also heard from Senators that the Senate's remit covered any activity or initiative that could be deemed significant for the life of the university, both in terms of immediate policy and practice and future direction. The team understands from senators that the Senate does not create content or initiate policy - these come forward from the Academic Council or faculties. The Senate's task is to approve, amend or reject policies. It should be noted that the central organisational structures are largely replicated in the faculties although some approaches to representation differ, for example, students are elected to serve on Faculty Councils.

2.5 The relationship between the Academic Council and the Senate was described to the team as one of 'peaceful co-existence' and while this description has some positive connotations, it also suggests a navigation of decision-making that is overly cautious and likely to stifle innovation and hamper agility and flexibility. From the team's perspective, there are a range of options that would allow TSU's organisational arrangements to be streamlined and made less bureaucratic. And while there is a healthy tradition of faculty and Research Institute autonomy the team *recommends that the TSU governance structure be changed to better support the senior leadership of the University, notwithstanding the legal constraints imposed by the Government of Georgia*. The role of Vice-Rectors, for example, *can be enhanced so that they are empowered to drive through a more collaborative approach to the discussion of education, research and innovation in areas such as teaching and learning and pedagogy, research practice etc*. This vertical organisational dimension is of added significance given that horizontal cooperation between faculties is often weak while co-operation between Research Institutes and faculties is in need of significant stimulation. In summary, TSU is an important public university with rich traditions but *given the on-going financial challenges it needs to consider ways in which its governance structures can better support decision-making around institutional sustainability and prioritisation*. As part of this process the team also *recommends that TSU evaluates the success factors that allowed the university to sustain itself and, in some respects, thrive during the Covid-19 pandemic with a future emphasis on the promotion of innovative practice, examples of which emerged during the period of the pandemic*.

2.6 Strategic development and implementation at TSU is guided by the Rector but is also strongly influenced by 'bottom-up' engagement. In this context, informal communication lines are an important aspect of decision-making. The university's current strategic plan was approved in 2018 and now has two years to run before a new plan has to be developed and approved. Alongside the normal internal stakeholder discourse the current Plan also benefits from a number of external perspectives including work by national agencies (the State Audit Office of Georgia) and commercially oriented research analysis organisations (PricewaterhouseCoopers). The Strategic Development Plan embraces four strategic directions viz. scientific, research and innovative activities; educational activities; student life and institutional development. Ten strategic goals are spread across these four directions and each goal is defined by tasks and indicators. There is a detailed action plan that supports the delivery of the Strategic Plan although this only shows 'deadlines for fulfilment' to the end of 2020. The SER notes, however, that a new 3 year action plan is being created to take account of TSU's most recent experience and that this will adopt a new approach involving four horizontal strands (Teaching and Learning; Scientific Research and Innovation; Institutional Development; Third Mission) and four

vertical strands (student centredness; internationalisation; digital transformation; Inclusion). As the university moves forward it is essential that it is able to make judgements on its performance that are based on well-founded evidence and, as has been noted earlier in this report, the development of the university's SER was hampered by the lack of easily available big data. The team understands that the university is moving towards a new unified information management system that will support both academic activity and the data management needs of the organisation. *The successful implementation of the new unified information system is critical to a full understanding of the institution's performance in all spheres - education, research, third mission - and should be regarded as an important priority for the university.*

2.7 The position of students in the TSU governance structure displays features that, in the view of the team, highlight both strengths and weaknesses in the university's approach to student representation and engagement. As noted in 2.3 and 2.4 above, university statutes allow for a significant student representation on the Senate and students that the team met confirmed an inclusive culture at Senate meetings and a strong view that their opinions were being listened to during those meetings. However, the lack of student representation on the Academic Council is in the team's view, anomalous, particularly given the importance given to student centredness in the TSU strategic planning process for the next three years (one of the vertical strands of a new action plan). In some ways this is mitigated by the election of students (30%) on to Faculty Councils. However, it is important that students are able to sit alongside academic and research staff in the Academic Council so that they can contribute fully to the future strategic directions of teaching and learning and research at TSU. As things stand, it appears to the team that students are denied the opportunity to contribute to these high level formative debates about the nature of their learning and research environments and the future academic direction of their university. This democratic deficit needs to form part of the on-going discussions TSU has with the government and parliament concerning governance structures - whether directly or through the good offices of the Permanent Conference of Rectors of Georgia.

2.8 Since 2006 a Student Self-Government (Students' Union) has been in place at TSU. It plays a co-ordinating role in relation to a wide range of cultural, sports and educational events. The Student Self-Government also seeks to represent student interests in discussions with the senior leadership and the administration of the university. Alongside the Students' Union, the university has in place an independent Student Ombudsman. The Student Ombudsman position is flagged on the TSU organisational diagram although, interestingly, the Student Self-Government is not. The Student Ombudsman service is often used as a mechanism for resolving student complaints in circumstances where students prefer not to engage directly with the designated senior managers of the university. The decisions of the Student Ombudsman are advisory to the university but, the team understands, decisions made by the service are generally accepted and, if rejected, can be subject to further adjudication in the court system.

2.9 Student self-government delegates and leaders are elected every 2 years and membership is free for all students. 700 students have joined the student self-government although this is a very small percentage of the student body and perhaps reflects some of the challenges of organising the student voice at TSU mentioned earlier in this report. In general relationships between the Student Self-Government and the university authorities were described by both student representative and senior managers as being cordial and business-like with lines of communication between student officers and the Rector and Chancellor open and spontaneous.

2.10 It is notable that the funding of student activities is not channelled through the Student Self-Government. That task is allocated to a special board, comprising representatives of NGOs and

university professors. Bids for funding are received from both the Student Self-Government and individual students. Each bid for funding is then considered on its merits. The team understands that this approach to the funding of student activities was introduced to allow for greater transparency, equity and accountability in the spending of this budget. These principles are, of course, central to any form of robust financial management. However, if the TSU students' union is to grow as an organisation and show itself capable of representing all elements of the student body then it needs to be given opportunities to undertake serious responsibilities, such as budget management. And while such arrangements might require careful support and monitoring, perhaps involving the Chancellor's Office, *the team recommends that TSU considers allocating a specific budget to the Student Self-Government for the funding of student related projects and initiatives.*

3. Quality culture

3.1 One of the distinctive features of TSU's organisational structure is the high level governance function established for its independent Quality Assurance Service (QAS). The senior leadership of the university regards the QAS as an important focal point for a wide range of quality assurance and enhancement activities including programme development and accreditation. As was noted in one of the team's discussions involving senior leaders, the QAS is regarded as a 'serious' endeavour. The Head of the QAS is elected for two terms and is empowered to promote initiatives and issue directives on quality matters so that standards can be maintained. In this context the team notes that there was almost universal appreciation for the role of the Quality Assurance Service in providing support for faculties during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is noteworthy that TSU views its response to the pandemic not simply as a normal function of the QAS but, as it states in the SER, a normalisation of crisis management as part of quality management policy. This has a core truth about it but it is also important to note that many of the initiatives promoted by the university in this period can be seen as part of an organic development of innovative practice in the area of learning and teaching that has been prevalent in the sector for a number of years.

3.2 Thus, the shift to comprehensive on-line learning follows trends in the delivery of learning and teaching - e-learning, hybrid learning, technology led and technology enhanced learning - that have long been championed by those leading learning development in HE, including learning technologists, as ways of supporting and enhancing the student learning experience. Indeed, many of the debates around student centred learning have involved questions about the role of technology and e-learning, especially in terms of learning outcomes. Equally, the urgent capacity building training for staff in delivering various forms of on-line learning during the pandemic should, ideally, build on well-established institutional professional development frameworks. Perhaps, one of the most significant lessons for universities in their responses to the pandemic is how decisions on investing in and supporting the learning environment and infrastructure need to be placed at the forefront of institutional decision-making. In the case of TSU that should now involve, *inter alia*, *consideration being given to the establishment of a dedicated unit / department to support the professional development of staff (both academic and administrative)*. The correlation between sound on-going investment decisions in the learning environment (staff training, encouragement of innovation, technical resources) and the ability to respond quickly and effectively to episodes of crisis management is clearly an important consideration for any quality assurance service.

3.3 The SER provides a broad account of the quality culture footprint at TSU. It is very apparent that the university thrives on engagement with international partners and agencies in its efforts to develop and embed a quality culture across all of its activities. In part this is seen as an extension of its role as a 'leading institution...formulating the national as well as the international profile of the country'. Some initiatives to improve institutional quality culture have launched comparatively recently and these range from the development by the QAS of high level university-wide effectiveness indicators to a focus on the student role in championing quality culture. The team is encouraged to see particular attention being paid to student engagement in quality processes, not least as the university makes clear in both the SER and the brief SWOT analysis in the current Strategic Development Plan that the shortcomings in relation to quality culture are a weakness that needs to be addressed¹⁰. This is summarised as follows: '...students and employers have low motivation to be

¹⁰See <https://tsu.ge/en/quality-assurance/page/Involvement-of-Students-in-Quality-Assurance-Mechanisms--Sprags->. The project overview states: 'Students will be actively involved in the development of educational programs and the quality of teaching and learning, provide student feedback to program implementers as well as administrative staff, and continually strive to improve student learning experiences.'

involved in university quality assurance mechanisms. There are employers in every single study programme committee, but often their involvement is superficial. Students involved in different committees are often from student self-governance.'

3.4 These weaknesses in engagement with quality processes from two key constituencies undermine some of the basic QA mechanisms for the development and delivery of academic programmes. For example, TSU sets out a number of principles that are central to 'the Elaboration and Development of Educational Programs'. These include the 'development needs of science/industry, the state and/or society, as well as the requirements of the local labour market and international market trends' and 'Student-centered teaching that considers the individual needs of students and their inclusion'. In addition, the TSU peer review process for educational programmes highlights the role of students in the programme evaluation and development processes¹¹. These methodologies are soundly based but they cannot achieve their intended outcomes without a comprehensive buy-in from all stakeholders. The team accepts that the development of a broadly based quality culture is a medium to long-term formative process. The current situation reflects a greater attachment to quality assurance, especially as it relates to external accreditation, and, as a consequence, there is, in the team's view, an increased need for a focus on quality enhancement. The key priorities in relation to greater stakeholder engagement with quality culture have already been identified. The task now is for TSU translate aspiration and pilot projects into widely accepted and visible practice and culture. In this context *the team recommends that TSU considers the further development of KPIs to support analysis and measurement of quality systems in all activities of the university.*

3.5 Quality culture for research seems to be geared around research outputs and there is a lack of impact analysis. Alongside this research management methodology is unclear. This applies especially to Research Institutes. *The team recommends that the Quality Assurance Service should extend its activities to research, including monitoring quality assurance systems in the Research Institutes. This added responsibility can be aided by the implementation of the new information / data management system.*

The training for students was led by representatives of the Scottish organization "Sparqs" (Student partnerships in quality Scotland). The aim of the training was to increase students' competencies for involvement in the development of the teaching-learning process'.

¹¹ <https://www.tsu.ge/en/quality-assurance/page/The-Elaboration-and-Development-of-Educational-Programs>

4. Teaching and learning

4.1 The SER states that the university does not have separate strategy documents for its core activities - quality assurance, research, internationalisation etc. - preferring to take a 'holistic' approach that combines all such activities into the university's strategic development plan. While there is much to be said for approaching strategic developments in this way, there is also a risk that the important narrative and vision pertaining to an area such as teaching and learning is somewhat lost amongst the tasks and indicators (often quantitative) that sit at the heart of TSU's strategic development plan. Certainly, the team would have found it useful to have been able to consult a university overview of teaching and learning strategy in a stand-alone document. This can help in better understanding not just the fitness for purpose questions that lie at the heart of the IEP methodology but, just as importantly, the path travelled, options for change and innovation, connections with quality culture and ultimately the broad vision for the enhancement of the learning and teaching environment. So, for example, one of the tasks set out in the strategic development plan is 'to modernise teaching and learning methods in line with modern requirements'. A standalone document setting out teaching and learning strategy can offer important amplification or nuance to such a task and its related indicators. Indeed it might clarify for the reader what is meant by 'modern requirements'. Similar considerations are true for the other strategic tasks established in the plan under the heading of educational activities.

4.2 Day-to-day responsibility for the delivery of teaching and learning rests with faculties. It is also clear from the Strategic Development Action Plan that faculties sit at the forefront of the drive for change and improvement in this area. This is a considerable responsibility and one made more difficult by the tendency for faculties to operate in their own subject silos with individual faculty plans being taken forward to the Academic Council for consideration. This is obviously appropriate where there are specific subject characteristics that might determine particular approaches to pedagogy or learning resources; however, as has been noted earlier in this report (paragraph 2.6), a lack of horizontal co-operation between faculties can be a hinderance to the sharing of good practices and also lead to inconsistencies in approach that then result in a differential student experience depending on which faculty is delivering the programme. And while improved faculty co-operation is obviously a *sine qua non* for greater coherence in learning and teaching policy and practice, there are also other approaches than can support synergies in teaching and learning across faculties. The SER notes the absence of a dedicated central unit for supporting and promoting developments in teaching and learning / pedagogy and suggests that the establishment of such a unit would help improve learning and teaching at TSU. The team agrees with this conclusion and *recommends that all three study cycles should have an established mechanism for improving the skills and capacity of academic staff*. This can be achieved through self-referral to programmes / courses run by the Central Unit or through the use of academic staff appraisal systems that include individual professional development plans as one of the measurable outputs from appraisal. It would also be relatively straightforward for TSU to *establish wider platforms for the development and sharing of best practices in learning and teaching / pedagogy*.

4.3 It is clear from the SER narrative that the Covid-19 pandemic presented particular challenges for the university in relation to moving to new delivery modes for teaching and learning. This was, of course, common to higher education sectors across the world. The team finds a broad consensus from internal stakeholders that the transition to on-line delivery modes during the pandemic was achieved with reasonable speed and supported by appropriate training and written guidance. In addition, the team commends the efforts made by TSU in providing psychological support services for students during the period of the pandemic with special teams of university staff making themselves available

to provide advice and guidance, particularly for those TSU students based outside Georgia. The lessons learned were perhaps not unique to TSU. For example, the continuous and systematic professional development of teaching staff at TSU would have helped with the adoption and utilisation of technology solutions, particularly in respect of older academic staff that traditionally have been hesitant to engage with innovations in teaching and learning. Equally, the practice of assessing university students in the virtual learning environment has been common practice in many HEIs over the last 10-15 years. This could have been another focus in the professional development of TSU academic staff in recent years, providing what would have been greater institutional resilience in reacting to the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, there are many examples of on-line assessment instruments that have been developed in co-operation with students, and this can be viewed as part of the implementation of a holistic programme of student-centred learning.

4.4 Many universities are now moving beyond the immediate crisis management of the pandemic into more considered views of what form learning and teaching should take over the next 5-10 years. Some of this is pragmatic in terms of understanding what might drive future investment decisions in the learning environment over the medium term. There are also some fundamental debates taking place in the wider HE sector about the shape and style of delivery best suited to support and enhance student learning. Such debates are embracing a wide range of factors from flexibility in student choice, evidence to confirm (or otherwise) improvements in student outcomes, the inevitable pervasiveness of technology, value for money, and questions around the types of human interaction that should form the basic building blocks of a university education in its broadest sense. In this context the team was interested to learn that TSU had, by the time of the second visit, returned to normal face-to-face methods of teaching and learning. This was driven by national requirements although students at TSU were evenly split between those that welcomed the return to traditional ways of teaching and learning and those that had adapted well to the flexibility offered by on-line learning and found it helpful in managing their study-work commitments¹².

4.5 As was made clear to the team in many meetings with both staff and students, levels of financial support for students in Georgia are inadequate. Even those that benefit from the highest level of tuition fee support need to work so that they pay for their accommodation¹³ and living costs. For many students at TSU, therefore, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, the ability to pursue their studies through a virtual learning environment is a critical factor in sustaining their place at university. For many others, the challenges of maintaining their studies are, at times, insurmountable. The team received statistics showing that, in addition to the nearly 24000 active TSU students, an additional 8600¹⁴ students have chosen to suspend their studies. These are very sobering numbers and the senior leadership at TSU has no doubt that the lack of financial support for students in Georgia is the principal reason for these high attrition rates. The widespread tendency for students to work clearly also impacts on the quality of their education, particularly those studying at undergraduate level. And it is now commonplace for lectures and seminars to be scheduled in the early evening and at weekends. The team understands that the university is currently working on a student statute that would regulate the amount of time a student can spend working but it also recognises that this is far from a panacea and that, in many ways, it does not tackle the core problem

¹² Indeed the strength of student feelings on this issue were reflected in a meeting that took place in April when the Rector met with 300 students to listen to their views.

¹³ The team was advised that the current high cost of accommodation in Tbilisi is a particular factor in student work patterns. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine many Russian nationals have left their country to carry on their work, often IT related, in Tbilisi. This has pushed up the cost of accommodation significantly and the university has very limited dormitory accommodation (650 places) to mitigate this situation. TSU is working on plans to develop new dormitories but, given the financial and bureaucratic barriers involved in taking this forward, there is no prospect of this helping current cohorts of students.

¹⁴ Undergraduate - 4493, Masters - 1873, Doctoral - 1691, Others - 365. This excludes students that terminated their studies. In 2021 this numbered 500.

which requires reform of the national funding model. In short it requires a political solution. The debates about on-line learning therefore have a real resonance in the day-to-day lives of TSU students and their families. *The team recommends that TSU considers the appropriate balance between face-to-face teaching engagement and the opportunities offered by on-line learning, especially in the light of the need for students to work. The results of this investigation should be provided to the National Parliament so that it can then consider a change to the Law on Higher Education as it relates to on-line learning.*

4.6 There are several references in the SER to Student Centred Learning (SCL). These relate to practice in both teaching and learning and research and also to the development and approval of programmes (see also paragraph 3.4 above). However, the principles underpinning SCL did not come to the fore in the team's discussions with faculty staff and students. If raised it was at a level of generality and without any sense that it is at the heart of the TSU approach to teaching and learning or that there is a shared view across faculties about how this might be represented in the curriculum and in staff and student practice. The team was advised that TSU does not have a definition of student-centred learning. The team was pointed to TSU's participation in a number of international projects on student-centered learning, particularly those linked to the EUA, to demonstrate the university's commitment to the full implementation of SCL in teaching and research. These projects together with on-going work would lead to an agreed institutional definition of student-centered learning and this would be reflected in a revised strategic development plan. *The team recommends that this development work is taken forward with some urgency so that the university can agree an approach to student centred and research based learning that takes account of differences in subject disciplines and the rapid development of technology led learning. The strong engagement of faculties needs to be a fundamental aspect of this process.*

4.7 The university has an estate that comprises 27 buildings and although the team did not have the opportunity to 'walk' the estate it heard from senior leaders at both central and faculty levels that the physical learning environment lacks consistent investment and needs substantial improvement in some basic areas, e.g. teaching accommodation, technical equipment. This is not simply an issue of financial wherewithal; it also has much to do with the need to obtain Ministry approval (often across 2 or 3 ministries) for procurement or land purchase. The bureaucracy involved in this approach can delay the start of improvement initiatives by 12 months or more. The team was given an example of ministry funding authorisation for new IT equipment being given in 2019 with the delivery of the first tranche of that equipment not taking place until 2022¹⁵. As has been noted earlier in this report, public universities are having to compete hard with private universities for student numbers; and student decisions on university choice will inevitably reflect their perception of the extent to which the learning infrastructure is likely to support and enhance their studies. In the area of IT investment the speed of technological change demands a well-considered and funded programme of rolling replacement and updating. A delay of three years leaves existing equipment in an unreliable state, often unable to run core software updates.

4.8 In many ways such examples of bureaucratic inertia encapsulate the difficulties faced by TSU in its external setting. Greater institutional and financial autonomy would allow such investment decisions to be progressed more quickly and effectively with a demonstrable benefit in terms of the sustainability of the learning environment, staff and student satisfaction and measurable improvements in educational and research outcomes. *The Team recommends that TSU's senior*

¹⁵ The team was told that some TSU computers are more than 10 years old.

leadership continues to press the Government to develop a new funding model for universities, which supports decentralised decision-making by universities, so that capital expenditure on the learning environment meets the appropriate and expected standards for a university sector.

4.9 TSU has a significant student population that is being buffeted by a wide-range of current and developmental issues in learning and teaching. The pressures to address these issues, many highlighted in the paragraphs above and in the TSU Strategic Development Plan, are intense. In these circumstances, *the team recommends that TSU considers giving oversight of these key developments in learning and teaching to a new appointment at the level of a Vice-Rector.*

5. Research

5.1 Research-intensive is the most commonly used description of TSU and this goes far beyond the formal designation of the university within the Georgian Higher Education system. Thus, while TSU celebrates the breadth and depth of its academic offering and the uniqueness of many fields of study - with the university sometimes described as 'classical' - it is clear that, for many, its standing in world rankings (Shanghai, Times Higher etc.) is its core *raison d'être*. These standings are listed in both the SER and the current Strategic Development Plan. The Strategic Development Plan is also revealing in that it has a heavy focus on scientific, research and innovative activities with four strategic goals and over 25 strategic tasks. This is significant in its own right but also provides a telling comparison with the other elements of the Strategic Development Plan. There is a real sense that, in terms of organisational priorities, research is *primus inter pares*. And, as stated in the SER, 'the rank of TSU is largely conditioned by its research activity'. It is no surprise therefore that the senior leadership of the university is unapologetic about using all available resources (up to 37% of the total university budget) on supporting and enhancing research activity. The broader national context for sustaining research in universities is bleak with only 0.35% of the state budget being directed to research activity. The broader conclusion reached in the SER is that 'TSU researchers are dependent on national and international grants which are unsustainable'.

5.2 The issues surrounding the basic sustainability of research at TSU are therefore front and centre of efforts to increase the visibility of research outputs. However, the university's senior leadership is also conscious that the wider research environment at TSU lacks organisational coherence and that this impedes not only the optimisation of research outputs but also the diversity of approaches, particularly in relation to inter-disciplinary initiatives. An important part of this organisational dysfunction relates to the position of the 16 Research Institutes that continue to act in a largely autonomous way, despite being formally part of the university since 2011. This lack of progress on integration of research institutes within TSU is something that came up in conversations that the team had with all staff constituencies. It is clear that there are important historical and cultural reasons for this lack of progress but, in the team's view, there is an urgent need for a process of 360-degree integration of the Research Institutes into all aspects of TSU life to be accelerated over the next few years. As noted above, this is a financial imperative but it is also critical that the silo mentality in both faculties and Research Institutes, currently observed by the team, is challenged.

5.3 In the SER it states that 'TSU plans to work harder to ensure the smooth and more efficient integration of these entities [Research Institutes]'. This task is undeniable, what is less clear is the process by which this might happen. This is not articulated in the SER and, as with other areas of core activity, greater clarity on the approaches needed to secure this end might be aided by a stand-alone research strategy. The options open to TSU to progress greater research coherence are various, ranging from greater management direction, to organisational changes that can facilitate co-operation and collegiality. One initiative that could act as a catalyst to improved research synergies is the development of a Graduate / Doctoral School at TSU. This is referenced in the Strategic Development Plan as a task and it is a direction of travel that, the team understands, is strongly supported by the university's senior leadership. *The team concurs with this assessment and recommends that, as one of its key priorities, TSU moves forward with establishing a Graduate / Doctoral School involving both faculties and research institutes. It also recommends that responsibility for the Graduate / Doctoral School rests with the Vice-Rector for Research allowing that post to drive forward the timetable and the university-wide dialogue required to bring the School into early existence.*

5.4 The creation of a Doctoral School offers TSU a mechanism to address the problem of the current dispersal of doctoral studies across seven faculties. It also offers Research Institutes an opportunity to engage more fully in the supervision of doctoral candidates. The team understands that many fewer staff in the Research Institutes have PhD supervisory responsibilities than was the case when they sat outside the TSU structure. And when they are involved on a co-supervisory basis, as the TSU rules currently require, this activity is very much at the margins of their work. One Research Institute member of staff commented that he had directly supervised significant numbers of PhD students in the Soviet period and now that role was not available to him.

5.5 Some of the organisational difficulties relating to research at TSU can be seen in the lack of interdisciplinarity activity, apart from a few small scale initiatives. Indeed while the SER notes that TSU is a 'multi-disciplinary research university' little is said in the SER or the Strategic development Plan about the stimulation of inter-disciplinary research. Yet in the team's discussions with researchers in both faculties and Research Institutes there was an acknowledgment that working across disciplines should be a greater feature of research culture at TSU. However, it is clear to the team that this situation is unlikely to change unless there is some stimulus to encourage researchers to look outside their own immediate personal and linear research directions. Sometimes this stimulus needs to be driven at the university level and while exhortation from senior leaders can play a role in raising interdisciplinarity horizons, *the team recommends that, in the first instance, TSU considers the development of a (initially) small central research budget to help with the prioritisation of interdisciplinary research.* Raising the profile and experience of interdisciplinary research in TSU chimes with practice across the HE sector in Europe and is often at the heart of project funding from EU sources¹⁶. It is also increasingly an approach that is demanded by commercial sources of funding. The team understands that shifting research towards greater interdisciplinarity is a major challenge and one that can often be met with resistance from researchers more used to dealing with their own disciplines. There can be no doubt, however, that this challenge needs to be met as the success of interdisciplinary research offers a route to improved funding and therefore greater resilience in the TSU research space. Indeed the TSU research response to the Covid-19 pandemic has shown how groups of researchers can come together across disciplines with potential commercial benefits for such projects.

5.6 There are a number of related considerations within this particular debate on the nature of research. As is often the case in universities, TSU's allocation of resources to research tends to follow well established research activity. This excellence funding model works well up to a point but it tends to marginalise research in many other disciplines. This is especially the case with research in humanities and social sciences where personal endeavour often forms the basis of the limited funding that comes forward. For the 'bigger' players, largely the Research Institutes, there is little incentive to step outside their single discipline research and this can only be broken down by a wider institutional vision of what research should look like at TSU. And this might involve some top-slicing of Research Institute income to support the wider vision. Greater equity in the allocation of research resources is also fundamental to the progression opportunities of academic staff. Measures of staff performance, and therefore promotion, are mostly geared to research outputs. Some universities are moving towards recognising teaching excellence and third mission activities in staff appraisal; this is not currently the case at TSU and there is, therefore, a need for the university to *ensure that all staff benefit from support for their research given that academic staff progression is heavily influenced by the individual's research profile.*

¹⁶ <https://erc.europa.eu/news/supporting-interdisciplinarity-challenging-obligation> The ERC's own evaluation of the positive impact of research that has a high level of interdisciplinarity is particularly striking.

5.7 It has been noted above (paragraph 5.1) that research outputs such as publications provide a key measure of TSU's research success. There are, of course, many positive aspects to this approach as it impacts on the university's positioning in the wider research community. Peer review rankings are very visible and are often seen as indicators of overall research excellence. However, there are drawbacks to this focus on league tables that rely on particular types of output. Clearly, for example, this approach offers no meaningful evaluation of how research supports service to society and the development of links to industry. The SER provides some indication of how this wider view might be achieved. TSU is prominently involved in the Erasmus plus funded project 'Raising Research Capacity of Georgian HEIs through Developing R&D Units (HERD)'. This project will offer access to a Georgian On-line Research Portal. TSU sees the potential for this to act as 'a good instrument to measure the success of scientific achievements, analyse human resources, research capabilities, etc.'¹⁷ And from the team's perspective it is pleasing to note that one of the objectives of the project is to 'enhance the capacity of the ... universit[y] in respect to research transfer and university-industry collaboration'.

5.8 Effective and progressive research management is a highly elusive endeavour and it requires levels of sophistication that require development over several years. It certainly involves analytical tools such as those being developed through the HERD project. It also requires external and internationally based peer input that supports benchmarking and the wider consideration of research excellence. Such peer engagements might form part of the TSU Strategic Development Plan as an additional task under Goal III – 'internationalization of scientific, research and innovative activities'. In summary, *the team recommends that TSU creates a more comprehensive system for understanding the impact of research and that this should embrace a wide range of measurement tools and not just those related to league tables.* This might also help to prevent the atomisation of research projects / activity, and support the appropriate targeting of limited funding. This move towards greater rigour in research management and evaluation also has implications for the research infrastructure. If real momentum is to be achieved in research growth then the upscaling of research management expertise needs to occur at the same time. The team, therefore, recommends that, alongside the existing Department of Scientific Research and Development, the university *considers the creation of a research project management, innovation and technology transfer department serving the whole of the university.* This new department might, in time, absorb the functions of the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Centre that currently supports the Research Institutes.

5.9 The team is aware that, as with learning and teaching, the range of its recommendations for research are ambitious and demanding. There are, however, two other areas that need commentary. In its gap analysis the team noted the lack of institution wide research ethics and research integrity committees. This important gap is acknowledged by TSU's senior leadership and *the team recommends that those committees, operating to benchmark European standards¹⁸, be established as a matter of some urgency, especially in the light of the intention to establish a university hospital.*

5.10 Finally the team wants to recognise the positive developments in engaging first cycle students in research, including through the production of a final year thesis. Indeed many bachelor programmes at TSU have been developed with a mandatory thesis element. The SER also states that students are often co-authors of research papers and that they are involved by academic staff in writing research grants. At the masters level an original thesis is a mandatory element of the programme. These aspects

¹⁷ https://herd.tsu.ge/ka/categori/24/Aims_&_Objectives

¹⁸ See, for example, The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/>

of research activity in taught programmes link with some of the commentary on student centred and research-based learning covered in section 4 of this report. This must be an iterative process and *the team recommends that TSU continues to develop opportunities for students to engage in research as part of their taught programmes.*

6. Service to society

6.1 The Third Mission (Service to Society) of TSU sits explicitly alongside teaching and research as a core pillar of activity of the university. It can also be seen prominently in the university's mission statement. And as has been noted earlier in this report, the university is an important focal point for the maintenance of Georgian national identity - history, culture, language - often sustaining academic programmes that would not be entertained in a more commercial environment. This level of commitment to service to society is commendable and, in many ways, reflects the university's well established role as a champion of national values. The willingness of the university to move forward with this commitment to service to society can be seen in its initiation and co-ordination of the Erasmus + institutional co-operation project 'Strengthening the Quality and Relevance of the Third Mission in Georgian universities'¹⁹. The project, with significant involvement from other Georgian universities, some European universities and national agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), resulted, amongst other things, in a very valuable mapping of TSU's third mission activities and an analytical report that provides considered judgements on the strengths and weaknesses of this core pillar of university activity. The report and the related detailed mapping spreadsheet formed part of the original documentation provided to the IEP team.

6.2 The SER notes that 99 third mission activities were identified as part of this project and these are broken down by three main categories - continuing education (3); knowledge transfer and innovation (21) and social engagement (75). These aggregate figures are revealing in themselves; also of considerable interest is the detail revealed in the associated spreadsheet which highlights a wide variety of projects and engagements and an involvement of multiple actors - faculties, Research Institutes, central university units together with a range of external partners, some based overseas. For example, the direct expertise of TSU's research institutes was provided to government and other organisations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The R. Agladze Institute of Inorganic Chemistry and Electrochemistry of TSU²⁰ focussed on accelerating the creation of a new disinfection device building on the work of already existing studies, while the I. Vekua Institute of Applied Mathematics developed mathematical models for charting the spread of epidemiological disease. Interestingly, mathematics, biology and chemistry students were involved in the investigations of the models 'carrying out numerical experiments on the bases of data of dissemination of infection in different regions of Georgia'. One cannot understate the currency of these projects and their service to society; however, they also reveal something of the potential to be exploited at TSU when clear priorities are identified and supported, work is taken forward without internal barriers, multiple actors, including students, are involved and the benefits both to the university, including commercial benefits, and wider society are well-articulated. This can, of course, apply equally to the first and second missions of the university and also offer potential for innovation across missions²¹.

¹⁹ The importance of this project can perhaps be gauged by the fact that the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia formally opened an on-line meeting setting out the purpose of the project. See <https://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?t=srch&search=Third%20Mission&id=11770&lang=eng>

²⁰ The project description states that 'the Institute received the first letters of interest from the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health. Relevant funds (a loan) have already been allocated under the government-sponsored "Produce in Georgia" program for launching the production of ozone generators. Thus, TSU Ozone, an enterprise producing generators, will start operating at the Institute in 2021. Ozone generators will be produced on demand. Negotiations have been launched with various private companies on selling the product'.

²¹ Many universities have 'changed their learning and teaching to create projects with challenges from real life, for instance from local businesses, and they promoted interdisciplinary learning in groups. Often, the students drove these reforms themselves...the aim to

6.3 There is, however, a strange paradox that surrounds the third mission of TSU. On the one hand, the team sees a deep rooted, philosophical belief in the core nature of this mission and there are many examples of good practice in support of this. On the other hand, the platform for delivering this mission sometimes presents itself as fragmented and only partially inclusive. For example, there are some examples of university links to general education (high school) but, from the team's perspective, this type of connectivity *needs further development in a strategic and systematic way across a wide range of disciplines, especially STEM subjects. This would help enhance the reputation of TSU in the local and regional communities.*

6.4 The TSU Third Mission report describes the current position with a refreshing and insightful honesty:

'However, these activities are not equally distributed across TSU faculties and research institutes and centres, there is no department and/or unit in charge of administering university 3M activities and policy, no measurement of 3M activities, no budget pre-allocated for 3M activities, and no visible alignment of 3M activities with university strategic development plan. Additionally, these activities receive little publicity and often one faculty does not know what the other one is doing in terms of the third mission'.

These are critical conclusions and ones that need close attention, particularly in relation to systemisation. Such considerations could best be framed by a specific third mission strategy with linked policies. *The team recommends, therefore, that the university develop a third mission strategy so that research outcomes can be made more effective in wider society. The strategy should also underpin TSU's role as a driving force for change in the country's economy. To further cement these developments the team recommends that the university creates KPIs to judge the impact of activities on improving / supporting service to society. This should be made part of the evaluation of staff performance.*

6.5 The third mission strategy should be widely owned and shared by all TSU internal constituencies - senior leaders, faculty and Research Institute staff, professional service staff and, not least, students both past and present. Alumni, for example, are found in large numbers in many of the key social and economic structures of the country. At the same time the reputation of the country is enhanced by the many TSU graduates establishing themselves in employment or further study positions in other countries in Europe and beyond. A fully functioning alumni association can be enormously valuable in helping to frame the future direction of TSU's third mission. TSU benefits from a very wide range of influential external stakeholders and these organisations will also be critical to the successful roll out of a third mission strategy. The team met a diverse group of external stakeholders as part of its on-line meetings and they were, in the main, positive about their relationships with the university. However, there appears to be little by way of systematic co-ordination of these links and often they seem to thrive simply because of informal lines of communication with individual faculty / Research Institute staff or senior managers at the central level. The team has no doubt that there is value in some informal lines of communication; *it recommends, however, that the university should make further efforts to improve co-ordination of responses to external stakeholders so as to benefit from potential synergies across areas and to avoid*

introduce innovation in education activities merge education and engagement with external stakeholders and creates a large common ground between the two missions'. <https://eua.eu/resources/expert-voices/88:universities-and-innovation-beyond-the-third-mission.html>

the problem identified by the Third Mission Report of one unit not knowing what another unit is doing in terms of the third mission.

7. Internationalisation

7.1 It has been noted elsewhere in this report that TSU is a self-aware and, indeed, self-critical institution. The narrative in the SER embracing internationalisation is fully in line with this reflective approach. The Strategic Development Plan stands at the centre of the TSU approach to internationalisation. It is therefore seen as a cross cutting tool with themes emerging across two of the four strategic directions - research and education. In this sense internationalisation was described to the team during one of its meetings as a tool and not a goal in itself. It is, of course, not unusual in the HE sector for internationalisation to be represented in the strategic planning process in this way. However, without a specific international strategy the link between internationalisation and wider institutional strategy can be a little opaque, lacking the context of past, present and future direction. This lack of transparency can particularly be the case where quantitative indicators are used as measures of achievement and the benchmarks for growth are unstated or unclear. This can be compounded in devolved structures where responsibility for targets is spread across many institutional units and questions of ownership become blurred.

7.2 For an external audience there are also questions about how TSU prioritises international activities. For example, one of TSU's strategic goals is 'internationalisation of educational activities' and three tasks and indicators are displayed under this heading. There is, however, no place for internationalisation of the curriculum or internationalisation at home in this list. The prioritisation of the existing goals may be legitimate decisions with well-reasoned cases. However, the granulation of decision-making is missing and this could be provided in the narrative of an international strategy. At all events, there is a comment in the SER that TSU 'needs to think more strategically' in respect of these missing elements with a move towards implementing relevant policies in both areas.

7.3 TSU supports its international activities through a small administrative International Office (foreign affairs department) of 7 staff but the Office lacks formal power and has no separate budget; it therefore depends on networking with academic units and individual staff to keep abreast of initiatives across the institution. So, while the International Office takes responsibility for the formalities of international agreements, some external projects and student and staff mobility programmes it does not initiate international activities. Many international projects are, therefore, developed and managed by faculties, sometimes with support from the International Office. The team finds that the staff of the International Office offer an important resource to the university and, *inter alia*, the team is impressed by the excellent support it provided for students achieving foreign language certification through the work of the Language Centre. There is a dynamic to its work that extends beyond its normal bureaucratic / functional boundaries; however, there are clearly limitations to what can be achieved by this office given its current remit and staffing levels.

7.4 The SER identifies a wide range of international activities, including bilateral partnerships, major research projects (ATLAS, COMET, FAIR) and EU funded projects and mobility schemes. In addition, there is a brief description of the International School of Economics (ISET). Established in 2006 this is an intriguing entity that offers bachelor and masters programmes in Economics taught in English and has an independent status (separate Governing Board, Academic Board, staffing) outside the TSU structures. Originally proposed by a former Prime Minister of Georgia it was established following initial input from the World Bank and ongoing support from the Government of Georgia, the Government of Germany, and Tbilisi State University. An international group of donors including BP, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Open Society Institute Higher Education Support Program, and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) are important to the on-going sustainability of ISET. The breadth of these international activities is commendable. What is unclear

to the team is what is the overarching structure, how are synergies encouraged, how are the metrics determined and, ultimately, what is the strategy that guides all these activities and forms the basis for future developments. *The team recommends that TSU develop a clear, transparent and comprehensive international strategy and determine, implement and evaluate clear priorities in key activities.*

8. Conclusion

8.1 Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University is the key reference point for the university sector in Georgia and it has an important self-acknowledged role in continuing to champion the development of the sector. This applies particularly to changing the funding mechanisms for public universities in Georgia so as to ensure that public universities compete on a level playing field with the mushrooming private sector institutions. This is very much a two-way street for the state and public HEIs. As is amply shown in the depth and breadth of TSU's third mission, investment in public universities can help sustain important aspects of the national culture and also provide a return on investment by stimulating economic growth through knowledge and technology transfer. In the language of economics there can be a clear 'multiplier effect' in such an investment strategy.

8.2 The university has many strengths in the way it is organised and operates; however, there is an over-emphasis on 'horizontal' organisation and decision-making and this needs to be balanced by a further development of 'vertical' culture. This should aid the effectiveness and efficiency of decision-making across the university. The team understands that there are many external constraints on a remodelling of the approaches to governance and institutional decision-making but it encourages the university to continue its diligent work, with other external stakeholders, to help bring greater flexibility and agility in its decision-making mechanisms.

8.3 The university is a very well-respected traditional European institution that demonstrates excellence in a wide range of areas. It should, however, look to improve its broader engagement with the economy and wider society. There is a great opportunity for the university to exploit further its many strengths, not least through the better integration of Research Institutes into the overall performance of the university. TSU is a very self-aware institution and can use the next development period to significantly enhance many of those activities. Such development needs to be supported by increased autonomy as the current arrangements are a significant impediment to the effective delivery of activities by a modern university.

Summary of the recommendations

- 1 Ensure that vacancies on the Senate are filled as soon as practicable.
- 2 TSU governance structure be changed to better support the senior leadership of the University, notwithstanding the legal constraints imposed by the Government of Georgia.
- 3 Role of the Vice-Rectors to be enhanced so that they are empowered to drive through a more collaborative approach to the discussion of education, research and innovation in areas such as teaching and learning and pedagogy, research practice etc.
- 4 TSU is an important public university with rich traditions but given on-going financial challenges TSU needs to consider ways in which its governance structures can better support decision-making around institutional sustainability and prioritisation.
- 5 TSU evaluates the success factors that allowed the university to sustain itself and, in some respects, thrive during the Covid-19 pandemic with a future emphasis on the promotion of innovative practice, examples of which emerged during the period of the pandemic.

- 6 The successful implementation of the new unified information system is critical to a full understanding of institutional performance in all spheres - education, research, third mission - and should be seen as an important priority for the university.
- 7 TSU considers allocating a specific budget to the Students' Self-Government for the funding of student related projects and initiatives.
- 8 Consider the development of a dedicated unit / department to support the professional development of staff (both academic and administrative).
- 9 TSU considers the further development of KPIs to support analysis and measurement of quality systems in all activities of the university.
- 10 The Quality Assurance Service should extend its activities to research, including the monitoring of quality assurance systems of the Research Institutes. This added responsibility can be aided by the implementation of the new information / data management system.
- 11 All three study cycles should have an established mechanism for improving skills and capacity of academic staff.
- 12 Establish wider platforms for the development and sharing of best practices in learning and teaching / pedagogy.
- 13 TSU considers the appropriate balance between face-to-face teaching engagement and the opportunities offered by on-line learning, especially in the light of the need for students to work. The results of this investigation should be provided to the National Parliament so that it can then consider a change to the Law on Higher Education as it relates to on-line learning.
- 14 The university urgently agrees an approach to student-centred and research-based learning that takes account of differences in subject disciplines and the rapid development of technology led learning. The strong engagement of faculties needs to be a fundamental aspect of this process.
- 15 TSU's senior leadership continues to press the Government to develop a new funding model for universities, which supports decentralised decision-making by universities, so that capital expenditure on the learning environment meets appropriate and expected standards for a university sector.
- 16 TSU considers giving oversight of the key developments in learning and teaching to a new appointment at the level of a Vice-Rector.
- 17 As one of its key priorities TSU moves forward with establishing a Graduate / Doctoral School involving both faculties and research institutes. Responsibility for the Graduate / Doctoral School rests with the Vice-Rector for Research allowing that post to drive forward the timetable and the university-wide dialogue required to bring the School into early existence.
- 18 Consider the development of a (initially) small central research budget to help with the prioritisation of interdisciplinary research.
- 19 Ensure that all staff benefit from support for their research progression. Too much resource follows well established research activity and it is important to recognise that academic staff progression is heavily influenced by their research profile.

- 20 Create a more comprehensive system for understanding the impact of research i.e. not just driven by league tables.
- 21 Consider the creation of a research project management, innovation and technology transfer department serving the whole of the university.
- 22 Establish independent research ethics and integrity committees, operating in line with European standards, especially in the light of the intention to establish a university hospital.
- 23 Continue to develop opportunities for students to engage in research as part of their taught programmes.
- 24 Develop a third mission strategy to ensure that research outcomes are made more effective in wider society. Be a driving force for change in the country's economy.
- 25 Further develop links to general education (high school) in a strategic and systematic way across a wide range of disciplines, especially STEM subjects. This would help enhance the reputation of TSU in the local and regional communities.
- 26 The university develop a third mission strategy so that research outcomes can be made more effective in wider society. The strategy should also underpin TSU's role as a driving force for change in the country's economy.
- 27 The university creates KPIs to judge the impact of activities on improving / supporting service to society. This should be made part of the evaluation of staff performance.
- 28 Improve co-ordination of responses to external stakeholders so as to benefit from potential synergies across areas and to avoid the problem identified by the Third Mission Report of one unit not knowing what another unit is doing in terms of the third mission.
- 29 Develop a clear, transparent and comprehensive international strategy and determine, implement and evaluate clear priorities in key activities.