

Charles University, Prague

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION REPORT

December 2019

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of Charles University, Prague. The European University Association's (EUA) Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated Charles University in 2017 with the report submitted to the University in July 2017. The university requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation when it submitted its original registration for the programme in 2016.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

In line with the IEP philosophy as a whole, the follow-up process is a supportive one. There is no prescribed procedure, and it is for the institution itself to set the agenda in the light of its experiences since the original evaluation. The institution is expected to submit its own self-evaluation report, which will describe the progress made, possibly indicating barriers to change.

The rationale is that the follow-up evaluation can assist the institution in evaluating the changes that have been made since the original evaluation: What was the impact of the original evaluation? What use has the institution made of the original evaluation report? How far has it been able to address the issues raised in the report? The follow-up evaluation is also an opportunity for the institution to take stock of its strategies for managing change in the context of internal and external constraints and opportunities.

As for the initial evaluation, all aspects of the follow-up process are also guided by four key questions, which are based on a “fitness for (and of) purpose” approach:

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

1.2 Charles University's profile

The broad characteristics of the university's profile have, not surprisingly, remained largely unchanged since the initial IEP evaluation in 2017. Charles University continues to be widely viewed as the pre-eminent university in the Czech Republic while it also actively cultivates its reputation and contacts within the wider European higher education space and beyond.

In terms of key institutional metrics¹, overall student numbers have been consistent in recent years with 2018 showing a total of just below 48,500. The proportion of students at the first, second and third cycles of study are also relatively stable. Staff numbers have increased from 4724 to nearly 4900 in 2018 with this change attributable to an increase in designated research staff. Income has risen from 390 to 438 million euros in the period from 2017 to 2018.

At the time of the initial evaluation visit the university was fully engaged in a significant change relating to institutional academic autonomy through a national accreditation process. Accreditation was achieved in 2018 and a large scale internal quality assurance exercise in programme accreditation followed. Around two thirds of programmes have now completed the rigours of this process.

The leadership of the university has a commitment to reform within the context of the history, philosophy and culture of the university. This reform agenda is strongly informed by an awareness of the challenges of being competitive in the wider European higher education space.

At the time of this follow-up visit the process for introducing a new strategic plan (2021-25) was under way with completion of that strategy expected in the summer of 2020.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process at Charles University was co-ordinated by a team comprising four Vice-Rectors, the Chancellor, the President of the Academic Senate, the Chairman of the Study Committee of the Academic Senate, three members of academic staff, a student and a staff member from the Rectorate. A draft of the self-evaluation document (SED) was considered by staff in faculties and institutes with feedback taken into account before final scrutiny of the document by the Rector's Collegium and the Board for Internal Evaluation (BIE).

The self-evaluation document of the Charles University, together with the appendices, was sent to the IEP evaluation team in September 2019. The visit of the evaluation team to Charles University took place from 29 October to 1 November 2019.

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

- Professor Sokratis Katsikas, Rector, Open University of Cyprus, team chair
- Professor Hannele Niemi, Research Director and UNESCO Chair of Educational Ecosystems for Equity and Quality of Learning, University of Helsinki, Finland
- Ms Liv Teresa Muth, PhD student, Ghent University, Belgium
- Dr Raymond Smith, former Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator

The team thanks the Rector, Professor Tomáš Zima, for his commitment to the IEP process and his kind hospitality throughout this visit.

¹ Figures are taken from the appendices to the university's Self-Evaluation Document.

The team also thanks the Vice-Rectors and the Chancellor 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 Věra Šťastná and her colleagues for the exemplary arrangements that have helped to make the evaluation run smoothly and efficiently.

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

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

- 2.1 At the outset it is perhaps important to highlight the extent to which the team found a well informed and interested staff body engaging with the IEP process². This had been underpinned by a cogently presented self-evaluation document and relevant appendices showing key developmental trends (metrics) for a five-year period. The university's preparations for, and responses to, this evaluation suggests to the team that governance and institutional decision-making processes are well-equipped, and indeed well accustomed, to responding to external scrutiny; and that the university's response is built on a mature and assured approach to critical self-reflection.
- 2.2 The recommendations delivered during the initial IEP evaluation in 2017 were wide-ranging and challenging. Moreover, many of the recommendations took a medium to long-term view of the university's future development. In some ways this acknowledged the university's then principal pre-occupation relating to the national accreditation process. The team understands from the university's leadership team that a number of the recommendations informed the accreditation process but that, for pragmatic reasons, the fullest consideration of the issues raised by the recommendations, is being integrated into the development and discussion of a new university strategic plan for the period 2021-2025. This also makes sense in terms of the national cycle of higher education planning undertaken by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports which inevitably also needs to inform the future direction of the university.
- 2.3 In the short-term, the university has decided to focus on the recommendations relating to quality assurance systems, the methodologies relating to the assessment of quality and how these core elements can be provided in a holistic way, given the on-going emphasis within the university on strongly decentralised decision-making within the faculties. The university is also keen for this reflection to be stimulated by a 'bottom-up' approach.
- 2.4 In terms of organisational structure, the number of faculties remains unchanged since the initial evaluation. From a governance perspective, the Internal Evaluation Board is now seen to be functioning effectively, while in 2018 a new Creative Activities Evaluation Board was established to act as the "supreme body of evaluation" for scientific work (research) and is notable for being composed exclusively of well-recognised foreign academics and researchers. The team also notes that there continues to be a strong representation of students in institutional decision-making bodies.

The team recognises that some changes in governance and organisational structures will be a medium to long term endeavour and notes that the university intends to use the development of the new strategic plan as a mechanism for strengthening its internal integrity and cohesion. In this respect, it is remarked in the SED that "one of the key priorities will be unity in diversity ("in pluribus unitas") i.e. an emphasis on the integrity of the University through common and unifying elements of

² The team found some minor examples of a lack of awareness amongst university staff and students but this did not detract from the team's general view on the level of engagement with, and understanding of, the IEP process.

university governance, while respecting the special aspects and autonomy of the different fields existing at the university”.

- 2.5 The team is supportive of this approach, understanding from the senior leadership that various options would be considered in the future to ensure that the university developed in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness. This might include some recasting of the faculty arrangements. For the time being however the focus, in organisational terms, is on “vision and goals, people, data and information and communication”. In some ways this is evidenced by the fact that faculty autonomy is seen by the team as remaining strong notwithstanding the move to institutional accreditation and preparations for a new internal university-wide quality processes.
- 2.6 The SED sets down a number of areas of progress in relation to university-wide approaches people, data and information and communication. The team is pleased to note the examples provided by the university and, in particular, the receipt of the Human Resources Excellence in Research Award at the beginning of 2019³. As part of the award the university has agreed to implement an action plan which is represented in a Gant chart that can be found on the university’s website. While this focus on research staff progression is, in many ways, admirable, the team regards it as important that the university continue to take the broadest view of how staff across the university are supported and incentivised. It has found that there is a general lack of financial incentives for improved performance across both academic and administrative staff. *The team recommends, therefore, that the university looks carefully at ways in which a more holistic approach can be taken to recognising and rewarding improved academic and administrative staff performance both financially and, as appropriate, in terms of promotion opportunities.*
- 2.7 During its evaluation visit the team has found areas relating to data, information and communication that need some targeted action to address lack of progress or shortcomings. The examples are:
- i some procedures and practices are still variable across the faculties, e.g. student surveys
 - ii integration of Management Information Systems (MIS) at the university level is a work in progress and consequently quality assurance is not yet fully evidenced based
 - iii information does not always reach the targeted recipients e.g. the PRIMUS project, outcomes of evaluations
 - iv a lack of transparency in some cases of decision-making e.g. appointment of faculty departmental heads.
- 2.8 The team recognises that the university may well be aware of most of these specific issues. Nonetheless, the examples do drive to the heart of the effectiveness of change management, not least in relation to a lack of consistency in faculty practices. The approach to student surveys, for example, was raised in the initial evaluation and the team strongly believes that bringing institutional consistency to this important quality

³ In 2005, the European Commission adopted a European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. These two documents, addressed to researchers as well as research employers and funders in both the public and private sectors, are key elements in the EU’s policy to boost researchers’ careers. Institutions that are willing to endorse the Charter and Code can apply for the “HR Excellence in Research Award”, which implies a long-term commitment.

feedback mechanism through common core questions (with scope for individual faculty nuances) can and should be resolved without undue delay.

- 2.9 In relation to data, the team is encouraged by the range of initiatives on institutional information systems. A number of these are described in the SED. This said, the ability of the university to secure and enhance quality assurance in all areas of activity is, according to the SED, highly dependent on accelerated progress in “improving the collection of data and information and networking with faculties and institutes of the University”. This is clearly an issue of the consistency and comprehensive capture of data but just as importantly the interoperability of core information systems.
- 2.10 Charles University is a large institution with significant student and staff constituencies. The team was advised that the main artery for information and communication was the university’s website and that important decision-making documents such as the reports of the Rector’s Board are published on the website as a matter of routine. In the view of the team it would not be surprising, however, for there to be some weaknesses in information flow and communication of decision-making. The examples noted by the team do, however, encompass some important matters and there may be some issues that need to be considered by the university in reinforcing messages that appear on the website, particularly in the faculty context. Equally, for information particular to individual faculties, perhaps Deans should investigate if there are any barriers to the way that this is communicated to all staff.
- 2.11 The team, therefore, *recommends that, in relation to the strands of data management, information and communication, the university:*
- i) redoubles its efforts to embed information systems that allow for the consistent and comprehensive capture of data as these relate to the quality assurance and enhancement of programmes and that, importantly, these systems developed to allow for interoperability.*
 - ii) reflects on the ways in which information is disseminated and communicated, paying particular attention to the vertical and horizontal flows of information within faculties.*
- 2.12 Immediately prior to the follow-up visit, the team received an early draft of the university’s new strategic plan. In discussion with the senior leadership it became clear that this was very much a first draft, prepared by the Rector’s office, which had been based on early feedback from faculties about what they regarded as the three most important priorities for the university, and scrutiny of strategic plans published by other comparable universities. In addition, the SED indicates that in the preparation of its new strategic plan the university is taking into account the recommendations arising from the initial IEP evaluation in 2017. The intention is, therefore, to engage the whole university community in public discussion of the next draft and then establish a document that can be scrutinised by the Senate, Scientific Board and Board of Trustees. This finalised document would include timelines and metrics together with an implementation plan to be monitored and reviewed on an annual basis. The current draft strategic plan has five key areas: people, excellence in research, the transformative nature of education, internationalisation and the encouragement of diversity within a thriving university environment. The team is confident in the processes associated with the development

of the new strategic plan, and the five key areas highlighted in the first draft show consistency with the ambitions and likely future direction of the university. In this sense the first draft of new strategic plan, in the view of the team, provides a sound platform for a final plan that can be approved in the summer of 2020. As this process continues *the team recommends that particular attention is paid to the highlighting of key priorities, SMART goals and KPIs.*

3. Quality Culture

- 3.1 As is noted earlier in this report, the transition, in the period 2017-2019, from an external nationally-based system of programme accreditation to an institutional system that allows for this process to be wholly within the control of the internal quality mechanisms of the university is a very considerable milestone in the development of the university's core quality culture. In some respects, of course, some of the key disciplines in programme accreditation remain the same. However, the measures of responsibility and accountability are fundamentally different and require a different mind-set for all involved in these processes. Just as importantly, the achievement of institutional accreditation allows for a large degree of self-defined creativity in the overall development of the university's programme portfolio and the ways in which synergies in subject areas can be better achieved with a progressive focus on inter-disciplinarity.
- 3.2 At the time of the initial evaluation a newly formed Board for Internal Evaluation (BIE) had been established to help steer the university through the national accreditation process. It was clear at the time that this forum was more than a pragmatic response to an immediate external requirement. The team has been able to establish for itself that the BIE is now an integral element of governance and institutional-decision-making for the university. It has been the clear central driving force behind the internal accreditation of over 600 study programmes - at the time of this evaluation two-thirds completed - and the involvement of six members of the BIE in the university self-evaluation team for this follow-up evaluation (see 1.3 above) is seen by the team as a testimony to the embedded role it now plays in the quality processes of the university. The achievement of institutional accreditation might be regarded as one of its first successes.
- 3.3 The team also notes that, while the BIE has been concentrating on programme accreditation, a recently established Department of Quality of Education and Accreditations, based in the Rectorate, is looking to finalise the details of an internal evaluation system. During discussion with staff in this new department the team was provided with a draft diagrammatic representation of this evaluation system and this appears to offer a robust approach to the evaluation process with an important constituent element of external scrutiny through a peer report. The team commends the inclusion of external reporting in the evaluation process and wishes to reinforce a view from the initial IEP evaluation that external business and industry-based stakeholders have an appropriate say in the on-going development of the curriculum. The draft narrative accompanying the diagram also emphasises the connection between faculty self-reflection on programmes and the ability of the institution to make properly informed strategic decisions.
- 3.4 While the BIE has had to concentrate on its role as gatekeeper of study programme accreditation, the team noted that it has also been able to start developing its own sense of quality culture e.g. reflecting on underpinning principles and how these can be embedded in processes. The SED lays down a clear set of standards and measures of quality for the preparation and development of individual degree programmes. These are articulated under a series of headings - profiling, curriculum, staffing and

research. The team was impressed by the university's commitment to significantly strengthening the international context in relation to programme development by drawing on best practice from abroad, not least through the 4EU+ Alliance⁴. In terms of the evaluation system, the university states in the SED that it intends to reflect further on the three cornerstones of quality orientation highlighted in the initial evaluation. This is to start as a discussion between faculties and degree programme guarantors (the academic member of staff overseeing the running of the programme) with a view to translating this into a common understanding across the university. In the view of the team this focus on faculty ownership of quality culture is important and the team notes the strong evidence that, to date, this had not been inhibited by institutional accreditation. Deans that the team met were generally supportive of the transition to internally and centrally guided quality systems although some commented that it was rather early to take a considered view on these arrangements. Nevertheless the university needs more than the *status quo* to take advantage of the freedoms offered by institutional accreditation. *The team therefore recommends that the university brings an increased impetus to the sharing of quality culture across and within faculties. This can be facilitated by appropriate communication platforms and in settings covering the full range from formal to informal, for example, focus groups and departmental discussions.*

- 3.5 Alongside this, *active student engagement with a quality culture needs to be encouraged, supported and developed.* It has been noted earlier in this report that the university has provided for significant levels of student representation on the key institutional and faculty decision-making bodies. Students that the team met during the course of the visit were generally informed and interested in the quality of their study programmes. This was true for students at all levels of study. It is notable, however, that these students often appear not to see their involvement and engagement with formal consultative mechanisms as a way of driving change in the quality of their programmes or their wider learning experience. The team heard from the senior leadership team that efforts were being made to encourage greater student participation in the deliberative forums of the university but that this is a slow process, possibly made more difficult by an historic suspicion of centrally directed initiatives. This, it was suggested, was not simply a matter of student passivity but a wider societal problem that needed addressing. Notwithstanding such issues, the team is of the view that the university, at both central and faculty levels, needs to play a full role in encouraging and welcoming students as equal contributors to the operation of quality systems and mechanisms. This might be aided by demonstrating that such engagement is not simply a bureaucratic chore, a box-ticking exercise or part of a prescribed central directive but one that values and takes note of their contribution and can, subsequently, lead to the enhancement of their learning experience and environment. As the demands of programme accreditation dissipate, *the team recommends that the BIE finds time to consider an enhancement agenda for all levels of study and how student involvement in that process can be best facilitated.*
- 3.6 The team was interested to explore two other areas of activity relating to quality culture - the management of quality in research and the approaches to quality in professional, non-teaching areas. It is noteworthy that the university has spent

⁴ An alliance of universities (Universität Heidelberg, University of Copenhagen, Università delgi Studi di Milano, Sorbonne Université, University of Warsaw and Charles University) looking to share developments in pedagogy and research, funded under the European Commission's European Universities Initiative.

some considerable time and energy since the initial evaluation in preparing a system for evaluating the quality of research work. The SED describes the goal of this work as finding “a tool to help the university to ensure the conceptual development of the disciplines...to ensure that they meet international standards and to strengthen the position of Charles University as an important research institution in the long term”. Through intensive activity, the university believes that it has developed a system of evaluation that, while complex, provides a platform for delivering the key research strategies of the university. The evaluation process is multi-faceted and draws on a self-evaluation report for the constituency, research indicators, bibliometric analysis, peer review and an on-site visit. The team notes that the evaluation cycle started in March 2019 and the intention is to cover all areas of research activity by the end of 2020. There is a key section in the SED that points to some of the potential pitfalls in this approach to evaluating research including the need to link university and national assessments, the need to find a significant number of external peer reviewers and the crucial importance of a committed staff engagement at all levels of research activity. Given the early stage of the evaluation process the team is not in a position to make judgements on its effectiveness or the extent to which these pitfalls of such a complex system were being avoided. However, the team is largely supportive of the university’s conceptual framework for the evaluation of research and recognises the senior leadership drive to put this in place in a relatively short time period; and in particular it commends the focus on international benchmarking and the desire to follow international best practice in evaluating research.

- 3.7 During the visit the team arranged to meet a range of professional service (non-teaching) staff from centrally based departments. In those meetings staff presented a consistent picture of professionalism and commitment to the mission of the university. Working relationships with faculty-based staff were said to be largely positive, although embedding new systems and securing university-wide buy in following institutional accreditation is clearly a challenge. However, as far as the team can determine, there is no process currently in place for the wider evaluation of quality in these professional service areas. There are, of course, opportunities for individual professional development but this does not extend into a broader infrastructure for quality assessment. Given the current priorities relating to the evaluation of both education and research the team understands that there are capacity issues in taking this forward. Nevertheless the output of these departments is clearly important both in their own terms and in relation to their interaction with other aspects of quality evaluation across the university. *The team therefore encourages the university to consider the development of arrangements for the measurement and enhancement of quality in professional service areas.*

4. Teaching and Learning

- 4.1 Institutional accreditation sets a high bar for the university's responsibility for continuously improving and enhancing the student learning experience. Clearly, much thought has been, and continues to be, given to the new internal systems for accrediting and evaluating study programmes at all levels. In terms of curriculum development the SED states that "a new typology has been implemented to allow greater flexibility in study and support different types of innovation". In addition other curriculum content requirements such as research training courses are being prepared. The success, or otherwise, of these arrangements will be played out in the coming months and years. The university rightly notes in the SED that the annual evaluation of degree programmes by internal experts and independent reviewers will provide that platform for continuous improvement in pedagogy. Indeed the team was able to scrutinise an early example of such external scrutiny by way of a specially faculty commissioned report on the five year law and jurisprudence (Mgr) programme. The benefits to the team of seeing this document were not with needing to understand the strengths and weaknesses of this particular subject programme but with the broader approach and the ways in which this can help deliver an enhancement benefit. The team agreed that this example offered many encouraging signs of how the new evaluation system could work across the university and the benefit that this could offer to students in their programme learning experience. The conclusions were challenging but offered on the basis of "a critical friend" and with international comparability of the programme firmly in mind.
- 4.2 This look into a future enhancement agenda, however, is very much dependent on the core building blocks for evaluation being in place and, of course, a willingness to close the loop. Recommendations for change need to be followed through in a systematic fashion and their impact monitored. The section on programme feedback in the SED is perhaps illustrative of some of these issues, particularly given the very large numbers of programmes currently being delivered by the university. In the context of one of the recommendations from the initial IEP evaluation it is stated that "in the case of student evaluation of teaching, the University has not made any progress, agreement on a common core has not been reached and the organisation of teaching and student surveys continue to differ from faculty to faculty"⁵. It is clear to the team that efforts continue to be made by the university to bring a more consistent and reliable approach to this type of student feedback and, in principle, there appears to be no great disagreement on how this might be achieved. A Tracking module has been developed by the university which should, when operational, support the systematic monitoring and evaluation of degree programmes. This, however, is predicated on fully functioning and inter-operable information systems. The team has commented earlier in this report on the importance of well-developed and inter-operable information systems and it reinforces that point in the context of the enhancement of learning and teaching across all programmes.
- 4.3 While Charles University has significant student and staff populations, it is generally agreed that, going forward, the number of study programmes is too large to be

⁵ The team found this to be an issue that existed *within* faculties as well as *across* faculties.

sustained as a sensible strategic objective. The process for consolidating the educational portfolio, however, is at an early stage and, as might be expected, there remain a mixture of views in faculties on how far this should be taken. Smaller niche programmes often attract small numbers of students and are highly resource intensive as a result; but, inevitably, there are often arguments made for maintaining such programmes linked to local or national imperatives or the particular expertise of an individual academic staff member. The university's senior leadership believes that there is scope for a reduction of 20-25% in the programmes currently being offered without damaging the balance between mainstream and more specialist programmes. Some of this might be achieved by a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary programmes and the team understands this to be a key ambition for the university. At the same time faculties have been asked to analyse where there is overlap in provision and bring programmes together; and there are some examples of faculties consolidating their portfolios in this way. The team is supportive of the university leadership's view that the number of programmes being offered needs to be reduced and it is encouraged to note that in the final phase of programme accreditation, taking place in 2020, that the BIE will be challenging faculties and programme guarantors, in a positive and constructive spirit, to be more innovative in the revisions and updating of their programmes and to take advantage of the opportunities for interdisciplinary synergies both within and across faculties.

- 4.4 This accrediting/re-accrediting process can therefore draw academic colleagues together to consider the relevance and position of their programmes within the wider university portfolio and how far those programmes reflect a quality and currency that can be measured positively against wider international benchmarks for similar programmes. Equally this process can start to play a role in embedding greater variety in approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and the consistent articulation of learning outcomes for courses and programmes. The initial IEP evaluation in 2017 recommended a general updating in learning concepts and the team notes that some faculties are now delivering actions relating to "teach the teacher" e.g. by arranging pedagogical support. Such support is also being made available at the university level and the Centre for Pedagogical Skills (the Paedagogium) has been established as a "coordinating platform for systematic support in this area". These initiatives appear to be having some traction as the SED notes that "following repeated requests from academic staff, the Paedagogium will further extend its range of services to include, for example, peer observations in teaching, with follow-up reviews, networking of people interested in pedagogical innovations, lectures by foreign experts". The university sees these developments, together with support for e-learning skills amongst staff, as providing an enabling framework for academic staff to reflect on their teaching practice and take advantage of examples of best practice both from within the university and through international networks such as the 4EU+ alliance.
- 4.5 The team received evidence from students and staff that some gradual improvement is taking place in relation to the teaching and learning experience. In its meeting with Senate representatives the team was told by student representatives that there appeared to be a new focus on improving the quality of learning. Deans are seen as an important driving force in this change of mind-set. However, it was also commented during that meeting that, at a national level, there is a lack of interest in the evaluation of teaching and little financial encouragement for changing this at the institutional level. And while there are some small indications that the Ministry

of Education is now becoming more pro-active in this sphere, the pace of change is still very slow.

- 4.6 From the student perspective, the team came across a mixed spectrum of views on the quality of the teaching and learning experience. These views seemed to be determined, in some measure, by the programme being studied and, more often, the faculty setting. In some faculties very large class sizes are the norm with teacher centred approaches largely dominant and this often leads students to feel that they are passive learners with little sense of interaction with their teachers. On the other hand, students from smaller faculties did not, in general, experience this problem and they commented favourably on their relationships with professors. The team was interested to hear, within this range of student opinion, a view that some academic staff would teach in the same manner whether facing 500 or 50 students. This type of approach meant that little or no attempt is made to engage with the student body (“chalk and talk”), formal feedback and its discussion is limited and, when provided, is often delayed meaning that any formative benefit is limited, learning platforms such as Moodle are rarely used and assessment approaches are built around oral examinations. Many of these themes are picked up in the external peer programme review of law and jurisprudence that has been undertaken in the Faculty of Law (see 4.1 above). And, as was noted in that review, some of these issues can be tackled by a change of mind-set within the academic community and an acceptance that change is often positive and should not be feared or shied away from.
- 4.7 As had been the case with the initial IEP evaluation, the team is struck by the metrics relating to drop-out rates at all levels of study. These continue to sit at a level above 50% for bachelor’s students and even for doctoral students are as high as 46% in 2018. During discussion with senior leaders, academic staff and students, a number of factors were said to be at play in relation to these statistics. The team was advised that, in terms of Czech higher education, these levels of student drop-out are fairly typical and that Charles University is better placed than most in this respect. However, there is a growing awareness at a national level that, in a wider European context, drop-out levels on this scale suggest systemic problems with the quality of teaching and learning at Czech universities. One particular problem at bachelor’s level revolves around students joining two programmes at the start of their academic studies and then dropping out of the one that they do not see as fulfilling their career ambitions. This suggests to the team that the headline drop-out rate is perhaps not a true reflection of what is happening in practice, particularly as this practice cannot be regarded as a transfer under the national legislation.
- 4.8 The university acknowledges in the SED that it has not been able to start a comprehensive analysis of premature termination of studies because (a) it needs to complete its system for conducting surveys between different target groups and (b) it needs the outputs from the newly established evaluation of degree programmes to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. The team is in no doubt that the issue of drop-out rates is multi-faceted and it notes that some actions relating to academic staff training and learning modalities are already in place to try and tackle some of the potential underlying causes. These efforts need to be consolidated and built upon and in the view of the team have to be properly informed by a thorough going analysis of all aspects of the problem. In the light of the national context, the university might find it helpful to work with other Czech universities in this analysis. Given the potential reputational damage, resource inefficiency and wastage of

student and staff time and energy that flow from high drop-out rates the team *recommends that the university takes forward this analysis of drop-out rates and any subsequent actions as a key institutional priority. Depending on the outcome, more consideration should be given to study counselling services.*

- 4.9 It is clear that the university is very aware of the many challenges it faces in relation to teaching and learning. The issues raised by the team in this chapter of the report are part of that wider picture. *In the view of the team the change agenda in relation to teaching and learning requires significant commitment from all parts of the university and it recommends that the response to this challenge should be driven at the institutional level by the appropriate Vice-Rectors.*

5. Research

- 5.1 It is noted earlier in this report (see 3.6 above) that, alongside institutional accreditation, some of the most significant progress made since the initial IEP evaluation has been in the area of research management and the adoption and operationalisation of a new system for evaluating the quality of research. This has been set within a clearly articulated medium to long-term strategy for research management (Strategy for Creative Activity Evaluation) initiated at the senior management level, and adopted following extensive discussion across the university.
- 5.2 The starting point for this change in approach to research is a clear desire to look beyond national boundaries for the benchmarking of all aspects of research activity being delivered at Charles University. In some ways this approach has been adopted to challenge a degree of internal complacency that, perhaps unsurprisingly, emanates from the historic pre-eminence of the university in national terms. From the senior leadership perspective, however, the national horizon will not necessarily help the university to maintain and improve on research excellence as it moves through the 21st century. In the same vein, the university is keen to challenge the lack of mobility and dynamism in the way research activity operates at the university, including the lack of wider research experience from outside the pool of Charles University graduates.
- 5.3 The SED is clear about the other main driver behind this step-change in approach to research. The national evaluation system is in the process of change, moving from a mechanical link between individual results and institutional support to a comprehensive evaluation of the research performance of the institution. The accompanying aspect of this new national system will be the allocation of funds to the university as a whole. This national resource allocation model therefore requires the institution to consider what mechanisms it needs to have in place to evaluate the quality of its research activity and how, in a strategic sense, it wishes to prioritise those activities going forward. As the university notes, it will need to find a balance between planned research and research deriving from the professional interests of academic and research staff and students. The senior leadership does not underestimate how much of a balancing act this will be given the historic sense of primacy in relation to individual research and governance arrangements that involve 17 faculties each with a significant sense of their own autonomy in scientific matters.
- 5.4 In many senses - culturally, organisationally, financially - the university is making a significant investment in these new arrangements for evaluating research. The team, while recognising the complexity and potential pitfalls of the exercise, believes that it is based on sound principles⁶, provides for an extremely important and determining international dimension and is an ambitious response to the recommendations made in the initial IEP report in 2017. In particular, the results of the evaluation are to be used “to find a consensus” on the university’s research flagship domains. In the meantime, the team notes that the university has come to

⁶ In the SED mention is made of the Leiden Manifesto as a valuable resource in developing the university’s position. The Leiden Manifesto can be found at <http://www.leidenmanifesto.org/>

a decision, following discussion with faculties, “to integrate existing flagships into broader units that are more transparent for both strategic partners and the public”.

- 5.5 Underpinning these overarching arrangements the team notes that, since the initial IEP evaluation, the university had been able to take forward various initiatives in support of the research domain. These include PRIMUS and an increase to the value of the basic doctoral scholarship. The team views the PRIMUS initiative as being of particular importance given that it is designed to support younger researchers with international experience establish new research groups and laboratories - thus increasing the diversity of research backgrounds at work in the university - and also stimulate the longer term ambition to attract major international grants through the European Research Council (ERC). Since the launch of the first PRIMUS projects in 2017 the team was told that the number of ERC grants had doubled from four to eight.
- 5.6 The SED provides a detailed account of the current standing of doctoral studies in the university; and while there are some positive features in the prevailing landscape the university accepts that transforming the quality of doctoral studies is a long term project. It has already been noted earlier in this report (see 4.7 above) that the level of drop-outs from doctoral studies is extremely high and this trend has shown no sign of change in recent years. Equally, the team notes that the completion times for doctoral candidates are significantly above the regulatory norm (three year doctoral programmes were taking on average an extra three years to complete and four year doctoral programmes were taking on average an extra two years to complete). These are concerning indicators and it was therefore important for the team to read in the SED that the university has commissioned “an extensive, university-wide analysis focusing mainly on [the] socio-economic standing of doctoral students and factors contributing to the timely and successful completion of studies, but also comparing the organisation of doctoral studies with leading Czech...and international universities⁷...”. While the outcome of this analysis was not available to the team at the time of its visit, the team believes that this benchmarking of the organisation and quality of doctoral studies against high ranking domestic and European universities offers a first step towards the greater integration of doctoral studies and allows scope for the establishment of a doctoral school if that is seen as a future strategic goal of the university. It is stated in the SED that the results obtained from this critical analysis will be evaluated and reflected in the modification of research and incorporated in the new strategic plan. The team *recommends that as part of this process the results of the analysis are widely disseminated across the university and that the staff and student research communities have an appropriate level of input into the modification of goals*. In addition, *the team recommends that, given the important performance issues that need to be tackled in the area of doctoral studies, the timeline for the agreed goals is “front-loaded” in the new university strategic plan*. In the very short term, the team sees the limit now being placed on the number of students that can be supervised by an individual supervisor as a first step towards improving standards of doctoral supervision.
- 5.7 From its various discussions with all levels of the university’s research community, the team witnessed a high level of consensus that the university needs to be more agile and dynamic to progress its reputation in a highly competitive international research environment. *The key challenges for the university in research continue to*

⁷ Masaryk University, Palacky University, Universität Heidelberg, Sorbonne Université, University of Warsaw.

be bound up with prioritisation and effective resource management and the team recommends that these continue to be placed at the heart of the on-going deliberations on the future direction of research. The diversification and internationalisation of the research community and a high level of creativity in salary and reward structures also need to be a part of the essential underpinning of the future research strategy.

6. Service to society

- 6.1 The team discussed the university's wider relationship with its local, regional and national partners - service to society - with a range of internal and external stakeholders. The focus of these discussions was largely on developments in knowledge and technology transfer together with the internal mechanisms that had been introduced to support progress in this area. In part this reflected the fact that one of the recommendations from the initial evaluation in 2017 stressed the need for the university to provide "a more coherent approach and demand sensitive...approach to external organisations seeking expert help and support". Perhaps another significant factor in this focus is the way in which knowledge and technology transfer relates to the university's research strategy. As is noted in chapter 5 of this report, the university is seeking to transform its approach to research and that includes the exploitation of research outputs. Thus both demand and supply sides of knowledge and technology transfer can be accommodated. And this might provide an impetus to improving the status of applied research in the university and setting this within the broader research strategy.
- 6.2 Since the initial IEP evaluation the most significant change in the area of knowledge and technology transfer has been the establishment of Charles University Innovations Prague s.r.o.. The purpose of the company, as described in the SED, "is to represent Charles University in the ownership structure of emerging spin-off companies and to manage its industrial property portfolio at more advanced stages of the commercialisation process". The team is encouraged by the establishment of this company but it is also aware that, in the wider European higher education space, such companies have been a feature of university structures for some time. Thus while the university perceives the benefits of the company to be realisable over "several years", there is already a large degree of "catching-up" that the university needs to achieve.
- 6.3 The team was told by external stakeholders that there are some signs that Charles University Innovations Prague is making a difference to external commercial relationships, not least in overcoming some of the legal bottlenecks that were commonplace prior to its creation. Alongside this, there is also evidence of improvements in communication and work has been completed on an online catalogue of services offered by the university. The Commercialisation Board is becoming more effective as a result of improvements in the infrastructure for technology transfer. In these respects the university is regarded as being more business-like. Furthermore, the SED outlines a number of initiatives taking place at both university and faculty levels to stimulate the understanding of how commercial innovation might be taken forward and exploited. These include the Via Carolina Innovation Fair and the beginnings of knowledge transfer projects in the social sciences and the humanities⁸.
- 6.4 External partners, however, stated that too many barriers still exist to allow for a real step change in exploiting opportunities in this area. In short, the university is not viewed as a natural partner for the exploitation of commercial activity and a

⁸ One notable example of knowledge transfer in the humanities that impressed the team relates to a gaming product that draws on historical data and brings together historians and IT experts. Over 6000 copies have been sold through a spin-off company.

rigidity in approach in many subject areas results in those looking for a more business orientation to pursue their ideas elsewhere. One external partner suggested that exposure to the core elements of commercialisation should be a formal aspect of career development for academic staff. The team understands only too well the difficulty in transforming this particular landscape and many universities struggle to manage this aspect of their activity in a dynamic and productive way. At this moment in time this needs to be considered a medium to long-term project for Charles University and planned for accordingly. *The team recommends, therefore, that the university explores the best practice of strategic partners in commercialisation. This can replicate the exercise that has been done in relation to research management and should be overseen by the appropriate member of the senior leadership team.*

- 6.5 In the shorter term, faculties indicated to the team, perhaps unsurprisingly, that they needed the central knowledge transfer infrastructure (Centre for Knowledge and Technology Transfer) to operate more efficiently. Within the university, innovation scouts⁹ are viewed as useful addition to knowledge transfer mechanisms and provide a much needed support for faculty activities. However, external partners felt that there was a large element of inconsistency in the way that the innovation scout system worked and that while some faculties took the role and purpose seriously others were less engaged with the project. A strong argument was made from this external perspective for there to be KPIs on commercialisation, including a more clearly defined and measured role for the innovation scouts. Indeed, measures of performance in commercialisation are becoming more important as government strategy is starting to focus increasingly on the way research and development can help transform the economy in the decade to 2030.
- 6.6 In taking forward this knowledge and technology agenda the university must not lose sight of the wider context of service to society. It is clear to the team that the university has wide-ranging connections to local and national governments, business, industry and the professions and that its standing in the city of Prague and more widely in the country is well-recognised and respected. The Charles University magazine *Forum* offers good insights into the work of the university and, in many cases, is able to show how this work interacts with society and seeks to make a positive difference to the lives of those outside the confines of the university. During its visit, the team was able to note how this work can be manifested within one faculty - the Law Faculty - through the operation of legal clinics and a focus on the position of refugees entering Europe and how this relates to human rights. *The team views this wider sense of service to society as an area for fuller consideration in the university's future development and recommends that this is taken forward as part of the discussion around the content and goals to be agreed in the new Strategic Plan.*

⁹ Innovation scouts are employed partly by the faculties and partly by the Centre for Knowledge and Technology Transfer. The role is designed to support the interplay between faculties and central university areas.

7. Internationalisation

- 7.1 The team is pleased to note the publication in 2018 of an internationalisation strategy for the university. This fills an important gap in the university's wider strategic development. In introducing this strategy the university has paid particular attention to the qualitative dimension of the selection and development of its external partnerships. The university has selected 15 "strategic partners" and provides development funds, determined on a competitive basis, for mutually beneficial projects with those partners. This reflects one of the conclusions arising from the initial IEP evaluation. In terms of organisational infrastructure, the recently formed Centre for Strategic Partnerships, based in the Rectorate, supports the prioritisation of international partnerships and, importantly, plays a part in the information gathering for the end of year evaluation of these strategic partnership projects. The Rector's Collegium is then tasked with considering these outputs and agreeing any changes to the future direction of inter-university cooperation. The team regards this as good practice in terms of overseeing the quality of international partnerships while continuing to stimulate interest in faculties and amongst individual researchers, particularly "fledgling" researchers, in the opportunities offered by cooperation with European partners.
- 7.2 One of the most striking developments in internationalisation at Charles University is its involvement in the 4EU+ Alliance (see 3.5 above). As the SED notes this provides a focus for joint scientific and pedagogical activities. In particular, the Alliance looks to harmonise work across four thematic flagship areas. These are: Health and Demographic Change in an Urban Environment; Europe in a Changing World: Understanding and Engaging Societies, Economies, Cultures and Languages; Transforming Science and Society: Advancing Computation and Communication; Biodiversity and Sustainable Development. In terms of teaching activities this includes harmonisation of curricula. The team regards this as an ambitious enterprise with implications not just for education and research but quality assurance and governance. One of the key underlying principles for this initiative is stated in the SED as follows, "participation in the 4EU+ Alliance...means that Charles University must learn to cooperate with partner universities more closely than it had done previously". However, the university also acknowledges that this arrangement is not without its significant challenges, including "reconciling differences between partner universities, such as educational curricula, conditions for ensuring permeability and mobility, or cooperation in the area of governance". The team shares this view of the challenges that sit in the way of making the Alliance a measurable success and there are clearly dangers associated with disenchantment setting in if the barriers to cooperation are not overcome. It also presents a level of complexity that might place a considerable burden on institutional leaders and managers, particularly when new governance and management systems for quality and research have only recently been established and are in process of bedding in. *Notwithstanding the excitement and potential of the 4EU+ Alliance initiative, the team recommends that the challenges and threats of the enterprise are kept under close and careful scrutiny by both the executive and deliberative branches of the university.*

7.3 It is also the case that if the university is to live up to its international strategy and, indeed, the priorities being set out in the new Strategic Plan, further action will need to be taken in relation to its current staff profile. For example, the team does not believe that the percentage of international staff working at the institution is commensurate with the standing of a university such as Charles University, and while some initiatives such as “extraordinary professors” have been introduced in an attempt to change the staff make-up the team *recommends that the university explores all avenues in its attempts to break down the barriers relating to international staff recruitment*. In addition, *the team recommends that some of the essential building blocks for a thriving international strategy are given added impetus, especially the development and enhancement of staff English language skills so that there is a more comprehensive capacity across the university and an improved uptake of opportunities for mobility together with the supporting enabling systems*.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The Charles University SED is a mature reflection on the university's current work, the successes and challenges of the last two years and an articulation of its broad strategic direction over the next five years. Through its narrative it has, in many ways, presented an honest and persuasive SWOT analysis. And while the university community exudes a pride and confidence in its many activities it is also increasingly aware of how it needs to position itself not simply in a national context but alongside the leading universities of Europe and beyond. It is quite clear to the team that the senior leadership of the university is determined to challenge complacency in its ranks and accelerate a change agenda that will lead it to greater competitiveness in relation to its European peers.
- 8.2 At the same time the university is, by its own admission, seeking to change its culture to embrace greater cooperation and collaboration with European partners. It is also noteworthy that the university is determined to use the freedoms offered by institutional accreditation to press ahead internally with greater faculty interaction across both education and research. This is especially the case with the development of the programme portfolio and a move towards greater interdisciplinarity. The team regards this as an important opportunity to reduce the number of programmes being offered by the university and to innovate in a range of areas relating to programme design and delivery. It believes that there is a growing acceptance in the university that this provides the platform for the enhancement of quality in education. It is also an ideal opportunity to engage/re-engage students in the future development of their university - not just for the benefit of the current cohorts but also for those that will be joining the university in future years.
- 8.3 The senior leadership is very conscious of the legal and historic aspects to the governance and organisation of the university and the team is confident that it is capable of navigating an appropriate path that respects those traditions while at the same time promoting change and innovation in the critical areas of university activity. There are many indications of this mood of change, not least in research and the growing internationalisation of the university. In addition, the university is planning to invest significantly in its future along interdisciplinary lines. A project involving the building of contemporary and sustainable buildings to house two new inter-faculty research centres - the Biocenter and the Globcenter - within the Albertov Campus has recently gone through a successful architectural competition. The project involves the Faculty of Science, the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics and the First Faculty of Medicine and the university hopes that "first rate research will attract scientists and students from around the globe" and that the campus "facilitates interaction between researchers and students". This is obviously a project that, all things being equal, will be delivered over a number of years but in many ways it encapsulates the type of change and innovation that the team believes is crucial to the future direction of the university and its ability to compete in an increasingly challenging external environment.

Summary of the recommendations

Governance and Institutional Decision-Making

- The university looks carefully at ways in which a more holistic approach can be taken to recognising and rewarding improved academic and administrative staff performance both financially and, as appropriate, in terms of promotion opportunities.
- In relation to the strands of data management, information and communication, the university:
 - i) redoubles its efforts to embed information systems that allow for the consistent and comprehensive capture of data as these relate to the quality assurance and enhancement of programmes and that, importantly, these systems are interoperable.
 - ii) reflects on the ways in which information is disseminated and communicated, paying particular attention to the vertical and horizontal flows of information within faculties.
- Particular attention is paid to the highlighting of key priorities, SMART goals and KPIs in the finalised university strategic plan for the period 2021-2025.

Quality Culture

- The university brings an increased impetus to the sharing of quality culture across and within faculties. This can be facilitated by appropriate communication platforms and in settings covering the full range from formal to informal, for example, focus groups and departmental discussions.
- Active student engagement with a quality culture needs to be encouraged, supported and developed.
- The BIE finds time to consider an enhancement agenda for all levels of study and how student involvement in that process can be best facilitated.
- The university considers the development of arrangements for the measurement and enhancement of quality in professional service areas.

Teaching and Learning

- The university takes forward an analysis of drop-out rates and any subsequent actions as a key institutional priority. Depending on the outcome, more consideration should be given to study counselling services.
- The change agenda in relation to teaching and learning requires significant commitment from all parts of the university and the team recommends that the response to this challenge should be driven at the institutional level by the appropriate Vice-Rectors.

Research

- The results of the analysis of doctoral studies are widely disseminated across the university and that the staff and student research communities have an appropriate level of input into the modification of goals.
- Given the important performance issues that need to be tackled in the area of doctoral studies, the timeline for the agreed goals is “front-loaded” in the new university strategic plan.
- The key challenges for the university in research continue to be bound up with prioritisation and effective resource management and the team recommends that these continue to be placed at the heart of the on-going deliberations on the future direction of research. The diversification and internationalisation of the research body and a high level of creativity in salary and reward structures also need to be a part of the essential underpinning of the future research strategy.

Service to Society

- The university explores the best practice of strategic partners in commercialisation. This can replicate the exercise that has been done in relation to research management and should be overseen by the appropriate member of the senior leadership team.
- The wider sense of service to society is as an area for fuller consideration in the university’s future development and that this is taken forward as part of the discussion around the content and goals to be agreed in the new Strategic Plan.

Internationalisation

- Notwithstanding the excitement and potential of the 4EU+ Alliance initiative, the team recommends that the challenges and threats of the enterprise are kept under close and careful scrutiny by both the executive and deliberative branches of the university.
- The university explores all avenues in its attempts to break down the barriers relating to international staff recruitment.
- Some of the essential building blocks for a thriving international strategy are given added impetus, especially the development and enhancement of staff English language skills so that there is a more comprehensive capacity across the university and an improved uptake of opportunities for mobility together with the supporting enabling systems.