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Peer Visit to Faculty of Architecture

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Preface

In the framework of the Austrian Project "Support for Higher Education at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University" (thereafter referred to as "the University" or "UKIM"), sponsored by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, peer visits to 6 Faculties (selected by the UKIM leadership) took place on 21-22 October 2003. These peer visits had been requested by the project coordinator at UKIM, and took place in combination with the complex external evaluation of the Faculties executed by three Macedonian experts. The visits benefited greatly by the comprehensive self-assessment reports produced by the Faculties, which were made available to the international visitors beforehand.

The primary purpose of these visits was to provide an independent outside opinion by international experts regarding the quality assurance (QA) and institutional assessment provisions that have been introduced into the higher education system of the Republic of Macedonia in the course of the last year. Moreover, a focus on the theme of Study Programmes had been chosen by UKIM.

"Evaluation is to determine the significance or worth of something by careful appraisal and study ... it is a developmental process that illuminates or enlightens the specific policies, processes and practice of its stakeholders and contributes to collective learning" (CERN - Capitalisation and Evaluation Research Network). Thus, rather than "examining" these UKIM Faculties, the international experts engaged in fruitful, profound and mutually beneficial exchange of experiences and ideas. The accumulated and horizontal findings of the international experts from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, and Serbia during their visits to the Faculties of Architecture, Civil Engineering, Economics, Technology and Metallurgy, Mining and Geology, and Philosophy will be contained in a Comprehensive Opinion paper, to be produced under the project. Selected horizontal findings are attached to this report as well.

The preface and the annex are common to all 6 reports, the main text is written by the visiting expert.



Introduction - Purpose and Scope of the Visit

The program of the one-day visit to the Faculty of Architecture (FA) consisted of a tight schedule of meetings with a broad variety of colleagues including

- Dean Professor Vlatko Korobar and his two vice deans
- the members of the Self-Evaluation Commission
- three (full, associate, assistant) professors¹
- three assistant lecturers¹
- a group of about 14 students ranging from second year students to recent graduates

The program also included a short tour of the premise of the Faculty.

The written background documentation for this visit consisted of a six page summary in English of the comprehensive and very detailed Self-Evaluation Report which the FA submitted to the Evaluation Agency of the Republic of Macedonia in July 2002 and which is only available in Macedonian language.

Present at the visit were also the external evaluators for this Faculty appointed by the Evaluation Agency: Professor Kristie Bambol, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bitola – replacing Professor Bozin Donevski from the same university; Professor Kiril Gramatikov, Faculty of Civil Engineering, UKIM; and Professor Simon Semov, Faculty of Fine Arts, UKIM. As a part of the regular (re)accreditation process, these external evaluators had visited the Faculty of Architecture in late 2002 for intensive two and a half day consultations based on the Faculty's Self –Evaluation Report. I was informed that this group has not yet finalized the report about its findings.

The discussions with the members of the Faculty of Architecture were frank and open, covering a wide range of issues related to the enhancement of quality standards at the Faculty. As requested by the Evaluation Agency, a special emphasis was put on the question of curricular reform and adjustments bearing in mind both the academic quality of the study programs at the relevant Faculties as well as their relevance with regard to economic and societal needs.

Mission and Profile of the FA

Observations

With slightly more than 800 students and about 50 academic staff, the Faculty of Architecture is the only educational institution of its kind in the Republic of Macedonia. It was established as an independent Faculty in 1976 following the separation of the former Technical Faculty which originally consisted of the departments of civil engineering and architecture. Like other schools of architecture throughout the world, the FA is a place that attracts the multi-talented – those who combine the mind of a

¹ selected at random by me from a list of five names which was presented to me at the beginning of the visit



mathematician, an artist, and an engineer with the intention to help shape to the physical world that we inhabit.

The FA is aware of its position at the crossroad of different academic disciplines and cultures where innovations and new directions occur more frequently. It knows that in order to fulfill its mission it must be prepared to constantly challenge the conventional wisdom and to dynamically modify and readjust its teaching and research by incorporating new areas of interest and concern like urban planning or environmental protection (and outphasing those that have become obsolete). This is not always an easy process to manage, even more so under very difficult and volatile economic conditions which characterize the situation at UKIM and in the Republic of Macedonia in general. But from the conversation during the visit it seems that there is a good amount of healthy self-confidence, mutual trust and a forward-looking attitude prevailing at the FA which is a major asset in terms of the capacity to handle this process.

Challenges and Recommendations

1. continue to review and, if necessary, revise the teaching and research at FA in accordance to internal (academic) and external (socio-economic) needs and demands
2. strengthen the profile as a decidedly interdisciplinary Faculty and share the experience of interdisciplinary work with other Faculties at UKIM
3. have a critical assessment of the total student number at the FA: what is the optimal capacity relative to existing resources (academic staff, rooms, equipment) *and* societal needs (labor market, employment prospects, economic development)?
4. involve all possible stakeholders, including non-academic partners (industry, employers, NGOs etc) in strategic planning

Additional Suggestions

5. enhance the research profile of the FA in a targeted fashion by performing a SWOT analysis of research and developing an action plan (consider to invite outside, national and international, experts to participate in this exercise)

Current Academic Programs

Observations

The FA offers academic programs on three different levels:

- a ten-semester program leading to a diploma as a fully qualified professional architect
- a five-semester program equivalent to a polytechnic degree ("architect-engineer")
- a four-semester postgraduate (M.A.) program



The two undergraduate programs are highly prescriptive and consist predominantly of mandatory subjects supplemented by only very few elective or optional subjects (5-6 out of 45) whereas the M.A. program offers much more choice to the students to pursue their studies according to their own preferences and talents. The directive nature of the undergraduate curricula is mainly owing to the fact that architecture (like medicine, for example) falls under the category of "regulated professions" where the requirements for the degree are to a large extent determined by rules and standards that are set by professional bodies and that define the necessary knowledge and skills to be recognized as an architect.

In spite of the fact that the general *content* of the curricula is largely pre-mediated, it seems that the implementation of the study programs at the FA leaves some room for developing a more flexible and more distinct curricular profile. Currently the individual subjects are taught in a relatively isolated manner with the tacit assumption that students can be expected to combine the various pieces of knowledge to a coherent whole. However, given the complexity of both intellectual and practical qualifications that they must acquire to become an architect, this assumption may be overoptimistic. It would therefore seem sensible if the Faculty made a deliberate effort to emphasize the importance of an integrated and cohesive study program. By doing so, it would have to give more priority to the synthesis of the individual subjects rather than just offering them one by one, for example by defining thematic modules consisting of a group of subjects.

Accordingly, academic staff as well as students should be aware that the accumulation of disconnected knowledge in great quantities is not the ultimate measure of success in studying; instead, the primary goal should be seen in the education and development of the students' potential as skillful and creative architects. In the light of this, it would seem advisable if the Faculty considered to provide even more opportunities for the students for project-oriented work, 'laboratories', practica, service learning and for professors for co-teaching.

Like at universities in other countries of the region, the number of classroom hours for students of the FA is very high. More recently, the Faculty has undertaken steps to reduce this number which is very commendable and should be continued. However, for as long as the remunerations policy not only at the FA, but in Macedonian higher education as a whole mainly rewards the number of hours that a professor spends in the classroom, there is little hope that a more fundamental re-orientation with regard to the traditional form of classroom teaching can be achieved.

A similar observation can be made in terms of the number and the format of exams that students have to take at the end of each academic year: There are far too many and, being mainly oral examinations, it is questionable whether they are 'fit for purpose' (there is a long list of literature about the shortcomings of orals exams). Here, the FA has the possibility to introduce change by its own decision-making power, and it should do so by developing new and different modalities of student assessment.



Challenges and Recommendations

1. make a deliberate and effective effort to further integrate the curricula
2. create more space in curricula for project-driven work, student laboratories and similar forms of student-centered, cross-disciplinary learning
3. replace oral examinations by continuous assessment of students' learning progress
4. analyse critically the reasons for failure in exams, prolonged study periods and student drop-out

Additional Suggestions

5. place more emphasis on the quality of teaching by providing training in innovative teaching and learning methods for all academic staff (which should be mandatory for newly appointed staff)

Future Academic Programs

Observations

With the Republic of Macedonia having signed the Bologna Declaration in September 2003, it can be expected that all Faculties in the country will intensify their efforts to revise their curricula in keeping with the stated common goal of the signatories which means the introduction of a two-tier modular degree system. Compared to other UKIM Faculties, the FA seems to have a certain advantage in pursuing this objective: Due to specific circumstances, it has about forty years of experience in organizing a five-semester program for engineers with relevant architectural expertise. It also is an advantage that the labor market is accustomed to a sub-diploma qualification offered by the FA.

However, it would be a mistake to build the future B.A. curricula of the FA on the five-semester program since it is no more than a derivative of the 'real' (ten-semester) diploma program and not a curriculum in its own right. The introduction of the B.A. and M.A. programs offers a unique opportunity for the FA to renew and redesign its curricula. It should embrace this opportunity and not get sidetracked by backward-looking debates about the need to preserve high academic standards that cannot be satisfied by a three-year program.

The goal of the future B.A. degree at the FA must be to qualify graduates for a dynamic (and to a large degree unpredictable) labor market by endowing them with generic knowledge and skills in architecture and enabling them to be functional within the work environment that they choose. The M.A. programs should offer a broad variety of specializations for those who have the talent and the ambition to deepen their knowledge and to work towards a more advanced professional (or academic) career. But it is critically important that the FA accepts the B.A. as its 'main product' instead of openly or silently depreciating it as an 'incomplete M.A.'.



Challenges and Recommendations

1. establish a curricula commission to design a B.A. program from scratch; as the starting point, it should develop a qualifications profile for the future B.A. graduate taking into account the national requirements of social development, and economic and employment growth
2. establish a similar commission to design the future M.A. programs at the FA

Additional Suggestions

3. invite a broad variety of stakeholder to join these commissions and try to initiate a discussion on qualification profiles that reaches beyond the FA

Quality Assurance at the FA

Observations

The FA deserves praise for its vigorous and methodical approach to implement the new quality assurance provisions. It readily appointed an Evaluation Commission with the mandate to prepare a comprehensive report based on the instructions of the Evaluation Agency. Despite considerable time pressure that was imposed on the Commission by the Agency, it accomplished its task in an impressive manner by producing an honest and constructive assessment that highlights (using the instrument of SWOT analyses) the achievements, shortcomings, and challenges, as well as the common goals that the FA is aspiring to.

The leadership of the FA adopted a positive stance towards the self-evaluation exercise and saw it as an opportunity for mobilizing a change-oriented attitude within the Faculty. Regrettably, the original momentum was weakened and to a certain degree even lost due to a lack of feedback on the part of the Evaluation Agency (the same observation was also made at other Faculties). Up until now, the FA is waiting for an official reaction from the Agency and nobody seems to know what is causing this long delay. It is very unfortunate that these uncertainties regarding procedural matters have impaired the possible impact of the self-evaluation at the FA.

At the same time, the visit confirmed the ongoing commitment of the FA leadership to raise quality standards by addressing the most pressing issues that were specified in the Self-Evaluation Report: the insufficient research profile of the Faculty, the inverse age pyramid of the academic staff, the need to strengthen the postgraduate program, generating new sources of income, reducing the average duration of studies and the drop-out of students, to name just some of the challenges. The discussions during the visit showed that not everyone was aware of the results of the report, and even less sure what consequences and plans for action should be drawn from it. Instead of waiting for a feedback from the Evaluation Agency or the Ministry, it would therefore seem advisable if the Dean's office took the initiative to identify priorities for change and improvement, and, jointly with the members of the Evaluation Commission, develop a strategy for action.



Challenges and Recommendations

1. broaden the discussion within the FA concerning the key issues and main challenges analyzed in the Self-Evaluation Report
2. re-appropriate the QA process by turning it from an instrument of external accountability to a tool for internal advancement and institutional development
3. give assistants and students a stronger role in the discussion about the QA agenda at the FA
4. keep up the positive attitude towards improvement and the trust in the FA's own strength

Additional Suggestions

5. expand the mandate of the Evaluation Committee by entrusting it to develop a strategic development plan following the findings of the Self-Evaluation Report

Annex: Horizontal Findings

Observations

High commitment and enthusiasm on the side of internal self-evaluation commissions, and openness and interest of Faculty management for the process resulted in a solid diagnosis, thorough analysis, and a long list of recommendations for change. Moreover, in some cases measurable change was already reached at as a direct result of the self-evaluation process.

Challenges and Recommendations

The over-aging of staff was identified as a time-bomb for UKIM. Filling this gap with young brilliant staff, and use their capacity instead of that of inactive professors without knowledge or practice in modern teaching techniques. There is a urgent need to increase the number of positions for assistants and young faculty at all the Faculties visited.

Study Programmes need to be broader, less, and shorter. Broader programmes are requested by the labour market, where flexible graduates are requested who can swap from one field of action to another, applying so-called core skills and inter-disciplinary experience to a rapidly developing job market.

Continuing training offers, a variety of post-graduate programme (to be organised also jointly with and for industry and commerce), and specialisation courses for employed people are both a growing request from society and a possible source of income. Every University needs to react to the trend towards Life-Long Learning across Europe.

Innovation in teaching is badly needed across faculties. Despite individual successes, on average far too much inefficient ex-cathedra teaching takes place. It is to be substituted by contemporary, interactive and project-like and practice-oriented training and learning styles. Training of staff in this field, and tools for measuring the outputs of the teaching units should be developed therefore.

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Students' ability to cope with their challenges after graduation is the most important criterion to be used in this respect.

Additional Suggestions

Alumni organisations should be set up. Far beyond their immediate function of telling the Faculty/University what happens to their graduates, in many countries they have been found an extremely helpful source for inspiration, innovation, information on labour market requirements, sponsorship and political contact.

The budget allocated to research is too small at present. Regulations on a 90% percentage allocated to teaching (= staff costs) are counter-productive to innovative and updated curricula. Attractive teaching is key to attract the best students, and to guarantee to them success in their professional life, as competent individuals, and as democratic citizens.

The initiated process of self-evaluation should be re-launched with new tasks, and triggered with new responsibilities. The Commissions should be empowered to undertake further prioritisation and operationalisation of necessary change. Moreover, in order to be acceptable partner for international cooperation, to attract foreign students, and to be visited by top scientist and educators from other countries, the University as a whole needs to be seen. At the end, an institutionalised and regular system of continuous self-improvement and external advice will enable Faculties and UKIM as such to keep the speed of development in international Higher Education.