

UNIVERSIDADE DA BEIRA INTERIOR

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION REPORT

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Team:

Fuada Stanković, chair

Gülsün Sağlamer

Fernando Galan

Howard Davies, team coordinator

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of a follow-up evaluation of the Universidade da Beira Interior (UBI), Portugal. EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) originally evaluated UBI in 2008, with the report submitted to the University in February 2009. In July 2011 the University subsequently requested that IEP carry out a follow-up evaluation.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme and follow-up evaluation process

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

In line with the EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme 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 was the case for the original evaluation, the follow-up process is guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

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

1.2 UBI and the national context

In 2008, like all other Portuguese higher education institutions, UBI was in the process of implementing the raft of reforms introduced by the Socialist government. The reforms had put into effect some of the principal action lines of the Bologna

Process, while at the same time re-casting models of governance so as to raise the level of institutional autonomy.

By 2012, however, a new centre-right PSD-PP government had come into office, largely as a result of the crisis which had forced Portugal to secure a 78 billion EUR loan from the IMF and EU authorities in 2011. At the time of the follow-up visit, austerity policies were already having a significant impact on institutional funding and student finance. The public universities and polytechnics had suffered substantial cuts, while the heavier tax burden on students and parents had made courses less affordable. Moreover, graduate unemployment was at an all-time high, further weakening the demand for higher education.

These developments affected all Portuguese HEIs, but those located in the interior, like UBI, tended to be regarded as less secure than the larger universities in the coastal cities. Depopulation and the drift of young people to the littoral had been long-term features of Beira Interior and there were fears that they would be exacerbated by the economic crisis.

Moreover, when setting out its public spending and taxation plans in its 2012 budget, the government had said explicitly that it wished to see a reform of the higher education system and a rationalisation of the national course portfolio, but it had given no indication of how these goals were to be achieved.

Notwithstanding the air of crisis in the country at large, the team found that morale in UBI was higher than might have been expected: student numbers had, in general, held up; there were faculties and departments which enjoyed a national reputation; and a strategic framework (Plano 2020) had been put in place which, in the view of the University, would stand it in good stead. UBI is nevertheless obliged to operate in a climate of uncertainty and insecurity, and it is clear that its resilience and resolve will be severely tested in the coming years.

1.3 The Self-Evaluation Process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a group nominated by the Rector following debate in the senate. The group was led by Professora Dra Amélia Augusto, Pro-Rector for Quality Assurance, and composed of representatives of the rectorate, administrative and teaching staff, and students. It had consulted widely and the full documentation was available on the intranet platform.

The report consisted of a review of how each of the 2009 recommendations had been implemented or, if they had not, an indication of the reasons why. Supplemented by extensive material in annex, it detailed the degree of internal restructuring that had taken place in the intervening three years. It also demonstrated the extent to which the recommendations had been used in a self-critical manner to inform the production of Plano 2020. The present follow-up

report recognises the effectiveness of the self-evaluation and offers further supportive recommendations.

1.4 The evaluation team (later team)

The self-evaluation report of UBI, along with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in September 2012. The site visit of the evaluation team to Covilhã took place in October 2012.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Professor Dr Fuada Stanković, former rector, University of Novi Sad, Serbia, chair
- Professor Dr Gülsün Sağlamer, former rector, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey
- Sr Fernando Galan, medical student at University of Cantabria, Spain, and representative of the European Students' Union
- Dr Howard Davies, EUA, team coordinator

Both the chair and the coordinator had participated in the original evaluation in 2008-2009.

The team warmly thanks Rector João Queiroz for his invitation and his hospitality, as well as all staff, students and external stakeholders, for consenting to spend time and to express freely their reflections on UBI's situation and performance. It reserves special thanks for Professora Dra Amélia Augusto, who acted as liaison person and who, with her colleagues Pedro Esteves and Filipe Santarém, assured the smooth running of the follow-up visit and our well-being.

2. Learning and teaching

- 2.1 At the time of the initial IEP evaluation in 2008-2009, the team had noted the adoption by the Faculty of Health Sciences of problem-based learning techniques which had proved successful elsewhere in Europe. Programmes in medicine, in particular, had acquired a distinctiveness which attracted students on a first-choice basis who might otherwise have enrolled in the classical medical faculties in Lisbon, Coimbra and Porto. This held true in 2012, so much so that the team formed the view that innovative pedagogy and flexible curricula were important not only for their own sake, but as strategic initiatives aimed at overcoming the recruitment difficulties inherent in UBI's geographical location.
- 2.2 The team was pleased to note that problem-based learning had been piloted in each faculty on a negotiated basis and supported by appropriate staff development. Popular with students, it had elicited reservations from some academic staff who felt that it represented too dramatic a contrast with the traditional practices prevalent in the secondary schools and posed problems for the less able students. The team nevertheless hopes that UBI will find an appropriate mix of learning and teaching methods, with the help of its evolving e-learning platform, and that student-centred learning will be generalised across all faculties. It regards the creation of a dedicated office, the *Gabinete de Desenvolvimento e Apoio Educativo* (GDAE), working to a Pro-Rector, as a positive step.
- 2.3 Student-centred learning implies investment in small-group study, although it is often the case that parallel use of e-learning systems can mitigate the cost. The team was anxious to explore the extent to which inter-disciplinary, and therefore inter-faculty, teaching might also expand some cohorts/groups which would otherwise have been non-viable. It found widespread agreement that inter-disciplinary study was desirable in its own right – as preparation for Master programmes, as well as a feature of flexible curricula allowing students greater freedom to customise their courses. The team observed, however, that the deployment of academic staff in faculties other than their 'home' faculty was patchy. There was as yet no effective central system for managing the movement of students or teachers between different academic cost centres.
- 2.4 The Team congratulates UBI on securing sponsorship, by a major bank, of annual pedagogic merit awards. It notes that these are Faculty-based and hopes that consideration will also be given to rewarding inter-Faculty teaching teams.
- 2.5 As indicated above, the team considers UBI to have every incentive to develop innovative and attractive programmes. It believes that the curriculum development process should engage alumni and external stakeholders, particularly employers. It also thinks it important that the implementation of learning outcomes, on which new

curricula are based, should carry through from learning and teaching strategies into assessment methods.

2.6 The introduction of incentives for the supervision of doctoral students led to a rise in PhD numbers in the three-year period from 2008. Although the team realises that the cost of doctoral study and the competition from other universities present problems, it believes that in the long term UBI should aim to set up a doctoral school. It acknowledges that critical mass, cited as a difficulty by UBI colleagues in the course of their meetings with the team, is an important consideration.

2.7 In accordance with these observations, the team **recommends** that UBI...

- 1 Continue to prioritise innovative pedagogy and flexible curricula in order to foster student-centred learning**
- 2 Explore ways of facilitating inter-disciplinary and inter-Faculty curriculum development**
- 3 ... including internal distance learning provision**
- 4 Utilise experience of alumni and external stakeholders when developing curricula**
- 5 Ensure that student assessment be linked to learning outcomes**
- 6 Make inter-Faculty teaching eligible for Pedagogic Merit Awards**
- 7 Consider a doctoral school in the long-term**

3. Research

- 3.1** The relationship of mutual reinforcement that exists between learning and teaching, on the one hand, and research, on the other, is the first of the four strategic axes of Plano 2020. Both research output and research income have risen dramatically in recent years and the team considers that this bodes well for the innovative curriculum development discussed in the previous section. In its discussions the team understood that UBI did not aspire to be research-intensive across the board, but instead would identify priority areas. The team appreciates that this is a necessary, albeit difficult, task. The team also learnt that it was easier to develop an interdisciplinary dimension in research (the regional demography of ageing was one example given) than in learning and teaching. It felt, however, that as interdisciplinary research grew in volume, inter-faculty teaching would become less difficult to achieve.
- 3.2** The team welcomed the setting up of the Instituto Coordenador da Investigação (ICI), which will work with the vice-rector to promote these policies. It will also oversee the completion of the switch to full-cost accounting and its inter-operability with the other accounting systems used by the administration, as well as the management of intellectual property issues and the signing off of bids to major national and international funding bodies. It will be important to raise the level of visibility of the creative and research work undertaken in the arts and humanities – for a number of reasons, including attractiveness to students, to international partners in collaborative curriculum development, and to research funders. Experience in other countries has shown that humanities students have a potentially influential role to play in innovation and knowledge transfer.
- 3.3** The team had the pleasure of meeting founders of start-up companies as well as representatives of major corporates. Both groups were very supportive of UBI's research and innovation activities. They generally agreed that there was more scope for in-company placements and for business and intellectual property law to be included in a range of curricula as elements promoting entrepreneurship. ICI is aware of this and intends to seek external sponsorship. The team wishes it well. Certainly, it should be encouraged by the positive regard shown by the external stakeholders, who stressed their high expectations of UBI staff and students. They pointed out that access to laboratories was easy; that there was strong evidence of commitment and focus; and that smaller institutions tended to encourage less conformist and more intellectually "disruptive" students. They regarded UBI as a national producer of qualified researchers, with which they could work confidently and efficiently.

The team therefore **recommends** that UBI:

8 Encourage the creative interaction of teaching and research

- 9 **Pursue ways of facilitating inter-disciplinary research**
- 10 **Complete the implementation of full cost accounting**
- 11 **Seek to further increase external research funding**
- 12 **Explore ways of incentivising the production of ISI/SCOPUS-listed publications**
- 13 **Develop initiatives such as the WIN-UBI-2012 innovation prizes**
- 14 **Maximise synergies between priority research fields and learning & teaching and internationalisation strategies**
- 15 **Expand its successful relationship with industry**

4. Internationalisation

4.1 Internationalisation is also one of the four major axes of Plano 2020. In the view of the team, however, the staff complement of the International Office (GPRI) remains too small to assure the development of synergies with curriculum development and research. While it is true that the ERASMUS Programme has given birth to two double degree programmes, its administration continues to constitute a major part of the work of the Office. The vice-rector too has the onerous task of overseeing both learning and teaching strategies and internationalisation. The team considers that sufficient additional resource should be made available to allow UBI to move forward more rapidly.

4.2 In particular, the team believes that UBI should seek to extend its range of active international partner institutions, perhaps those with a strong regional development focus, thus reducing its dependence on its Brazilian links. Assuming that government agrees to the creation of an international student status at undergraduate level, there should be much greater opportunity in the future for recruitment to whole degree programmes, delivered in English as well as in Portuguese, in addition to the existing credit mobility in the ERASMUS Programme. It is with this perspective that the team **recommends** that UBI:

- 16 Diversify choice of collaborative partners beyond existing countries, within a strategic framework**
- 17 Give greater prominence to foreign language competence in internationalisation strategy**
- 18 Develop strategy in respect of growth of demand for courses delivered in English**
- 19 Consider extending range of double degrees**
- 20 Further upgrade capacity of International Office to meet future challenges**
- 21 Raise level of staff mobility in the framework of bilateral agreements tailored to strategic needs**
- 22 Seek supplementary financial support from the private sector to increase student mobility**

5. Outreach to society

- 5.1** The third axis of Plano 2020 is UBI's commitment to its municipal and regional surroundings. In the opinion of senior staff, there exists not only a need for intervention, but also strong active demand coming from outside the University. The team was pleased to learn that relations between the municipality of Covilhã, the Parkurbis techno-park and the University were good; historically, this had not always been the case. It met the representative of a local NGO who described the involvement of UBI student volunteers in the operation of a women's rights platform. It took note of the students' wish that such volunteer work should be credit-bearing.
- 5.2** The team also had the opportunity to discuss at some length the prestigious UBIMEDICAL project. It noted the mobility of qualified staff between university and hospital, as well as UBI's participation in clinical trials of medical devices and pharmaceutical products and in telemedicine. It heard that the major corporate partner had opted in to the project because of its high regard for the problem-based medical curriculum.
- 5.3** The team was reassured by the self-evaluation report and by its conversations on site that UBI has strengthened established its profile as a centre of arts and culture and lifelong learning. These, taken together with its research and innovation activities, confirmed for the team the view frequently advanced by UBI colleagues, namely that UBI – in addition to being the largest employer – is making a valuable contribution to the well-being of Beira Interior. In lieu of specific recommendations, the team encourages the University to deepen its engagement.

6. Quality

6.1 The team welcomes the significant improvements made to the management information system, particularly the student record system which allows pedagogic committees to monitor student progress and to assess the performance of staff and courses.

6.2 The team recognises that UBI has taken on board developments in quality assurance at European and national levels and has successfully put in place effective quality assurance mechanisms. The transfer of responsibility for quality assurance to a central office (GQ) working to a pro-rector is a significant step forward, as is the setting up of committees based in the faculties and with student representation. UBI is now well placed to respond to the evolving requirements of A3ES at national level, as well as to adopt the proactive stance promised by the prominence given to quality assurance in Plano 2020. In line with this expectation, the team **recommends** that UBI:

23 act to deepen and enrich quality culture throughout the institution, and diversify the means used to gather student and alumni feedback.

7. Governance

7.1 In some respects the role of the Provedor takes on a quality assurance function. The team was particularly interested in the extent to which the new legislation had taken effect; at the time of the original evaluation it was not clear what the Provedor would do or how he or she would be appointed. It understands that although the duration of the mandate may vary from institution to institution, all Provedores have identical job descriptions. In practice, these leave considerable scope for the post-holder to develop a role appropriate to the local context. In UBI the opinions gathered by the team were unanimous. It was clear that students made intensive recourse to the services of the Provedor, who had successfully intervened on a wide range of issues, notably with a strong focus on the flexible payment of fees. As a result, relations between students, student union and the University administration had improved significantly. The team applauds the efforts made by UBI to develop a social fund for the support of students in the current crisis and, in view of the fact that cases of student hardship are likely to rise further, it **recommends** that:

24 the positive role played by the Provedor be given stronger administrative support

7.2 The Provedor had been appointed by the General Council following nomination by the student union. The Council, too, had been set up within the framework of new legislation and on the basis of statutes put in place after the original evaluation. The team therefore welcomed the opportunity to meet its President. It formed the view that the Council, while not primarily an executive body, played an important role in providing oversight and cohesion, assuring participation by all internal constituencies, and facilitating relations between the rectorate and the Senate, as well as between the University, the municipality and the region. The team was impressed by the support given to UBI by its external stakeholders. It also welcomed the inclusion of students on the General Council, but took note of the fact that the self-evaluation report acknowledged "room for more improvement" in student involvement in quality assurance. It therefore **recommends** that:

25 that the students' role in governance be consolidated

7.3 Much of the discussion during the original evaluation had focused on a matrix model of institutional management. The Faculty and Research Centre structure is strong: faculties enjoy a degree of autonomy, are established cost centres, and have clear identities which are reinforced by their location in different parts of Covilhã. The team observed that, at the same time, the rectoral team contains vice- and pro-rectors with transversal policy responsibilities which approximately cover the four strategic axes of Plano 2020. It was therefore keen to inquire how well the system worked. It concluded that the interlocking structures are operating effectively

together, on a basis of negotiation and consensus-building. Faculties respond to the policy steer coming from the rectorate, which advises, coordinates and acts as a resource; as a consequence, their relations with central administration are enhanced. UBI is not a large university and, in respect of its internal governance, its size works in its favour as long as consensus is sustained by a clear strategic direction. The team compliments the University on the degree of teamwork that it observed in senior levels of management and administration.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1** The team has seen a summary of Plano 2020 and considers that it both builds on the achievements of the recent past and constitutes a platform for response to the current crisis. The strategic plan is based on continuity of mission together with accelerated adaptation to the European Higher Education Area and internationalisation. It aims to put in place a robust quality culture, enhanced service to society and to the region, and creative synergies between learning and teaching and research. It is supported by a consensus which is perhaps stronger for being located in a relatively small University. UBI's governance and management structures combine a strong vertical spine of Faculties, Research Centres, Senate, General Council and pedagogical and scientific committees, an efficient central administration, and a proactive rectorate assuring strategic leadership and transversal policy coordination. This gives the University a strong base from which to move forward.
- 8.2** The challenge to UBI, however, demands more than gradual consolidation. The current crisis has rendered Portuguese higher education more volatile than at any time since the dramatic expansion of the post-Salazar decade. This time, however, the threat is one of contraction. It is apparent to the team that UBI has to position itself in anticipation of changes to the national system that are thus far undecided, as well as to the coming "rationalisation" of the national course portfolio indicated in the 2012 budget legislation mentioned earlier in this report. The current freeze on student numbers, coupled with action by A3ES, has led to course closures in other institutions. If a radical revision of the national *numerus clausus* were to occur, it is impossible to predict whether this would intensify, stabilise or reverse the drift of students from the interior to the coast.
- 8.3** Given these unknowns, the team firmly believes that the key to UBI's growth lies in innovative curriculum design, preferably in identified priority disciplines and inter-disciplines, backed by original research and set within a strategic framework aligned with European and international developments. It considers that opportunities for multinational, cross-border and regional collaboration should be energetically explored, in order, not only to expand at Master and Doctorate levels, but also to take advantage of any new legal provisions which open the way to the recruitment of international full-course Bachelor students.
- 8.4** Finally, the team wishes to put on record its appreciation of UBI's consideration of the recommendations made in 2008-2009. The University has devoted a great deal of energy to acting on them. The team recognises the efficacy of the steps taken and wishes UBI well for the future. It takes this opportunity to reiterate its gratitude to the Rector for his invitation, to Pro-Rector Amélia Augusto for her support, and to all those who shared their experience and their insights.