

UNIVERSITY "MEDITERRANEAN"

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the University "Mediterranean". The evaluation took place in the framework of the project "Higher Education and Research for Innovation and Competitiveness" (HERIC), implemented by the government of Montenegro with the overall objective to strengthen the quality and relevance of higher education and research in Montenegro.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of the project, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

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

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

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

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

1.2 University “Mediterranean”’s profile

The University “Mediterranean” (UM) was founded in 2006, as the first privately owned university in Montenegro. The university is owned by Atlas Group, and is legally registered as a private non-profit organisation, which signifies that any profit made by the university is reinvested into it.

The university consists of six faculties, with a total of nine undergraduate study programmes, ten postgraduate specialist study programmes and 11 postgraduate master study programmes. The university also offers one doctoral study programme, and a second one is in preparation. The study programmes are offered in three locations: rented spaces in two business centres in Podgorica and a building owned by the university in Bar, a coastal town approximately 60 kilometres from Podgorica.

In the academic year 2013-2014, the university employed 87 full-time teaching staff, 63 part-time teaching staff and 30 administrative staff. Approximately 1 500 full-time students were enrolled at the university. The total number of students enrolled is below the maximum for which the university is licensed.

In addition to its core activities, UM is also engaged in adult education, consulting, project research and publishing.

The vision of the university, as defined in the UM Strategy for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, is that “The University “Mediterranean” shall be a dynamic university which systematically stimulates mobility and promotes research careers and enables the talent and entrepreneurial energy of its teaching and administrative staff and students to show.”

Its mission, as defined in the same document, is “to lay the foundation for the management and completion of high-quality and prestigious research projects performed in the University’s fields and to educate managers in the fields of social sciences, law and economics, engineering and technological sciences, art sciences, mathematics and other sciences, so that they can develop their leadership potential.”

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a central team appointed by the rector in December 2013. The team divided the work into smaller groups and met weekly, even during public holidays. The evaluation team appreciated the dedication of the self-evaluation team, who produced a highly informative self-evaluation report despite a certain amount of evaluation fatigue, this being their third self-evaluation report in the eight years since the university was founded. The evaluation team also appreciated the efforts made by UM to translate a large number of documents pertaining to UM’s functioning, which the team found very helpful.

The self-evaluation report of the University “Mediterranean”, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in January 2014. The visits of the evaluation team to the

University "Mediterranean" took place from 2 to 4 March and from 11 to 13 May 2014, respectively. In between the visits the University "Mediterranean" provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

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

- Sokratis Katsikas, former Rector, University of Piraeus, Greece, Chair
- Erdal Emel, former Vice-Rector, Uludag University, Turkey
- Mikus Dubickis, student, Riga Technical University, Latvia
- Anna Gover, Administrative Officer, European University Association¹
- Ivana Juraga, Project Officer, European University Association, Team Coordinator

The team wishes to express its gratitude to all those who were interviewed for their openness and willingness to discuss during the meetings all issues concerning the university. Special thanks go to Dragica Zugic and Dragica Andjelic, who provided invaluable support to the team and were responsible for the efficient organisation of all the meetings and discussions. Finally, the team would like to express its sincere thanks to the rector, Professor Slobodan Backovic, for his friendly hospitality.

¹ Joined the team for the second site visit.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The governance bodies of the University "Mediterranean" are the Founders' Assembly (seven members, representing the founders) and the Managing Board (also seven members, representing academic staff, administration, founders, students and the public). The Rector manages the University, assisted by a vice-rector, the executive director, and the secretary general. The rector also presides over the Senate, which governs academic policy and consists of two representatives of each faculty, as well as two students.

Due to its small size, the University "Mediterranean" aims to keep its management centralised, with decisions by the management bodies made in a democratic way, primarily by consensus. In its discussions with management, staff and students, the team gained the impression that this arrangement was working fairly well. Both staff and students reported that the leadership was easily accessible and that it maintained close ties with them. However, the team also noted areas in which the UM governance and decision-making process should be improved.

Firstly, the team noted that there was a suboptimal connection between financial and academic management, with the rector being responsible for academic affairs while the key financial decisions are made by the executive director, who is also a representative of Atlas Group. The team would like to emphasise that there are very few academic issues which do not depend on financial resources. Therefore *the team encourages close collaboration, on an equal basis, between the financial and academic leadership, with regard to developing plans, including annual budgets.*

Furthermore, the team found that, while UM had adopted its "Guidelines for the Development of UM" when it was founded in 2006, it has not yet developed a long-term strategic plan. Moreover, insight into UM's financial operations led the team to conclude that financial sustainability was a major challenge for the further development of the university. In view of these findings, *the team encourages the founders to make a long-term investment into UM.* This would give a stable basis for strategic planning and underpin the future development of the institution. *Furthermore, the team finds it of utmost importance for UM to adopt a long-term strategic and business plan, developed through close collaboration between the owners and the academic leadership. These plans should outline the priority action areas for UM within its financial circumstances, set clear timelines and define the resources necessary for the implementation.* Based on its discussions with both the academic and administrative staff, the team is confident that UM possesses the capacity for this type of planning.

In addition to this, in the SER and its meetings with staff and students, the team learned that the lack of appropriate facilities was seen as one of the major weaknesses of UM, having an unfavourable effect on most of its activities. The team believes that establishing appropriate infrastructure is essential to the attractiveness and sustainability of UM in the long term.

Therefore *the team encourages the UM leadership to devote maximum effort to securing a university building and equipping it appropriately.*

The team noted that, during the process of its founding and in the intervening period, UM has made great efforts to develop a sound basis for the university management by producing a number of governing documents. UM's success in this is evidenced by the exhaustive list of appendices submitted with the SER, which include documents such as "Strategy for Quality Assurance and Enhancement", "Regulations on Student Mobility", "Code of Academic Ethics", etc. to name just a few. While commending it for this well-developed basis, *the team urges UM to focus, in the immediate future, on fully putting into practice the governing documents that it has already developed and on communicating these better to the academic community.*

The team found the UM staff it met to be enthusiastic and hard-working, and dedicated to providing a high quality education to the students, even in the face of time and resource constraints. Overall the team found that UM presented a good community spirit. However, the team felt that the sense of academic community could be further improved by enhancing student involvement in governance matters. The team recognises that student representatives do hold positions in UM governing bodies such as the Senate, and therefore *encourages the members of the Student Parliament to be more proactive in contributing to the governance of UM, through their already existing role in these bodies. The team would also recommend that UM gives students greater opportunities for involvement in governance so as to fully integrate them into the decision-making process and give a greater sense of involvement in the academic community.*

Regarding human resources, the team noted that UM employs a high number of part-time staff, amounting to more than 40% of its total teaching staff. While the authors of the SER recognised this as an issue for the university, no articulated human resources strategy has been developed to date. *The team urges UM to consider ways of creating an environment which would attract more full-time staff.* This would be beneficial to strengthening the academic community. To do this, UM needs to carefully examine the obstacles to attracting more full-time staff. Following this, *UM should develop a clear Human Resources Strategy which could, e.g. outline the support that staff can expect with respect to their career paths, research activity and professional development.*

The team learned that UM places great importance on the pedagogical competence and professional development of its staff, notably by including it as one of the conditions for promotion. At the same time, however, the team found that opportunities for in-house professional and pedagogical development were not fully exploited. Therefore *the team recommends that UM draws on its existing human resources and the good practices they use for the professional development of all its staff, e.g. by offering pedagogical training or mentoring of junior staff members by senior staff.*

In addition, after talking to different groups of stakeholders in the UM academic community, the team learned that a number of good practices and initiatives existed in the university

which could be disseminated and replicated by others. However, the team found that internal communication mechanisms were not efficient enough to facilitate this sharing of good practices. *The team therefore encourages the central administration to enhance the sharing of information between faculties and the propagation of good practices across the university.* Existing bodies, such as the Senate, could be used as a platform for this.

3. Teaching and learning

According to the SER, UM "seeks to achieve high standards of modern education and research and to become part of the European education and research area."

Overall, the team found that the basis of the three-cycle system has been established at UM, but noted that a number of postgraduate specialist study programmes still exist. The team was told that UM issues diploma supplements. In addition, preparations have begun to train staff in defining learning outcomes. *The team recommends that UM continues to develop the structure of its programmes according to the Bologna principles.*

In its conversations with students from various faculties at UM, the team learned that students were generally satisfied with the education they received. Elements which students particularly appreciated and emphasised as having attracted them to UM were: the small size of classes, the close contact with teachers and the clear information on courses and assessments. Based on the conversations with the students and teaching staff alike, the team concluded that a transition to student-centred learning is underway at UM. With respect to this, *the team encourages UM to continue the good work they are doing in transforming the teaching and learning process towards being student-centred, including their efforts to develop learning outcomes.*

With regard to the flexibility of learning paths, the team learned that UM provided a limited selection of elective courses, and that no formal academic guidance was provided to students. *In order to enhance the flexibility of learning paths, the team recommends that UM considers enriching the set of possible electives offered to students. Furthermore, the team recommends that UM introduces the role of academic advisers, in order to help guide and support students throughout their study progression.*

With regard to the practical application of academic knowledge, the team was told that this was encouraged, but found that it was not fully integrated into study programmes. For example, students cannot obtain ECTS for their practical work. *The team therefore encourages UM to systematise its approach to student internships. This should include assisting students in finding internships and making them an essential part of the study experience. In this respect UM should explore the privilege of being directly linked to a group of businesses, which could lead to mutual benefits of increased service to society and easier student placements.*

According to the 2013 data reported in the SER, the academic staff/student ratio at UM varies considerably between faculties, ranging from 1:4.1 at the Faculty of Visual Arts to 1:16.9 at the Montenegro Business School. The average across UM for 2013 data is 1:8.3.

With respect to human resources, the team witnessed the high level of dedication of UM staff, many of whom are young and motivated, to build up a modern university. However, in addition to the human resources issues mentioned in the previous chapter, it was evident to the team that the staff was over-burdened. *The team recommends that UM reduces the*

teaching workload of the staff. This will open up opportunities for staff to engage in research work and other activities, which would strengthen UM's attractiveness to prospective staff and students.

4. Research

According to the SER, UM aims "to prove its position in the scientific and research activities, include more staff, gain higher profits and use the results of the research and financial profit for the development of UM". The team was also pleased to discover, in its discussions with the Founders' Assembly, that the founders of UM are, in principle, supportive of the research aspirations of its staff. While expressing the aim to achieve high standards of research, however, the SER recognises that the educational function prevails over research at UM for the moment.

The team learned from the SER that UM does not have special laboratories for research, apart from certain premises such as computer classrooms, which are used in teaching. In addition, in the various meetings it had with UM teaching staff, the team was told that staff are overloaded with teaching duties and lack time to dedicate to research. However, the team also learned that some efforts towards developing research have been made, and UM has recently established a Research Centre. *The team encourages UM to continue in the positive direction of developing a Research Centre, especially in continuing its efforts to develop a research culture at UM.*

It is important to note that, despite the existence of the Research Centre, UM does not have an articulated research strategy. Therefore *the team recommends that, under the guidance of the Research Centre, UM develops a research strategy.*

With regard to the procedure for financial support from the university for staff research activities, the team found that staff members and the management have differing perceptions. While the management believed that the procedures and rules for obtaining financial support were clear, the staff were often not aware of how to obtain funding. Therefore *the team recommends that UM redoubles its effort to communicate the opportunities available to staff from the UM budget for financial support to research activities and professional development of staff* (including contributions to tuition for PhD studies and attendance at conferences). The Research Centre could be a central point for the efficient dissemination of such information.

The team also encourages UM to enhance the sharing of information within the university so as to help staff exploit existing and forthcoming funding programmes that are available to build up their research infrastructure, as they have been doing to a certain extent already. Exchange of knowledge and experience in this regard would lead to a more efficient and effective approach to securing financial support for research.

The publications of UM staff are limited mostly to national and regional levels. *The team encourages UM staff to make their research results more visible by considering increasing their publications in international journals.*

Doctoral studies at UM are in their infancy. Currently UM offers one doctoral study programme, launched in 2008, while a second one is under preparation. To date, a doctoral degree has been awarded to three students and another nine students are currently enrolled in the programme. *The team recommends that UM includes the development of future PhD study programmes in its long-term plans.*

5. Service to society

According to the SER, UM strives towards being recognised at national level as a socially responsible business.

UM's vision is to educate young people with the knowledge and skills to match the needs of the labour market. However, the team noted that the university does not monitor evolving market needs in a systematic manner. *The team encourages UM to enhance its interaction with external institutions and bodies, as well as to systematically track its alumni, in order to be more aware of the labour market.* This will help UM to shape its academic offer in line with the market needs.

Throughout the various interviews held during the site visits, the team was impressed by UM's strong network and its connections to a range of stakeholders in the business and non-profit sector. At individual faculties, the team witnessed some examples of good practices of partnerships with businesses. However, the team felt that UM was not fully exploiting its network. Therefore *the team urges UM to capitalise on its good network of partner organisations, and the reputation of its individual staff, to further build up its profile and to attract more students, as well as to create opportunities for generating additional income.*

Similarly, the team noticed good practices of lifelong learning courses offered at several faculties. These courses provide an additional service to society, but their potential has not been fully exploited by UM. *The team supports UM in its plans to strengthen its activities in lifelong learning, and encourages UM to use lifelong learning as an opportunity to contact prospective students.*

6. Quality culture

The SER states that UM "is firmly committed to ensuring and improving quality and to developing quality culture among all employees".

UM does not have an office for quality as an internal organisational unit that would deal exclusively with quality assurance. However, the team found that quality monitoring does take place at UM, and got the impression that the staff recognise its importance and discuss quality regularly in their meetings.

Quality monitoring primarily takes the form of student questionnaires, which are administered electronically and are identical throughout the university. However, the team learned that response rates to student questionnaires were low. While UM leadership emphasised that results of student questionnaires were regularly published on the UM website, students were mostly not aware of this. *The team therefore urges UM to pay more attention to closing the feedback loop, by actively communicating to students and staff both the feedback received and the actions taken to address it.*

In addition to student questionnaires, the team learned that the small size of the university and the individual classes made it easy for students to bring up any quality issues in an informal manner. However, students repeatedly stated that they saw the quality assurance procedures merely as a bureaucratic exercise. *The team therefore recommends that UM uses its small size and closeness of students and staff to develop alternative models of collecting feedback, e.g. allowing some modification of questionnaires per faculty or using focus groups in addition to questionnaires.*

The team also noted that UM has considered relations with its alumni and has accordingly begun preparations to set up an alumni club. While such a social club is certainly commendable and useful, *the team also encourages UM to introduce formal and systematic tracking of their alumni as an additional quality assurance procedure in order to ensure that the goals of the programme are achieved.*

Furthermore, the team noted the limited participation of part-time staff in quality assurance. While part-time staff are regularly invited to faculty meetings at which the results of quality monitoring are discussed, they do not regularly take up this opportunity, possibly due to time and space constraints, considering that some part-time staff travel to UM from abroad. *The team recommends that UM explores ways of ensuring that part-time staff is not a missing part of its quality culture.* This is especially important due to the high number of part-time staff.

Finally, the team learned that UM was dissatisfied with the level of support it receives in its quality assurance efforts from the Council for Higher Education, the government body responsible for quality assurance at the national level. The team heard that UM management and staff would appreciate more guidance from the Council in areas such as setting quality goals and defining indicators. While understanding the wish to receive more guidance, *the*

team recommends that UM uses the absence of strictly defined external quality assurance indicators to develop its own internal quality assurance system, which can be tailor-made for its needs.

7. Internationalisation

According to the SER, UM aims to attract students from the Western Balkans and to encourage the outgoing mobility of its own students to universities in the region and beyond. Moreover, the university "is ambitious to increase the number of researchers who take part in mobility, as well as to create the conditions for foreign researchers to stay at UM". In its vision, as defined in the UM Strategy for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, UM also states that its aim is to systematically stimulate mobility.

However, the team found that, despite this proclaimed aim and the abundance of well-developed management documents, UM had not developed an internationalisation strategy. While an international office exists, its resources both in terms of personnel and funding are very limited. Moreover, the university is a member of several regional networks, but does not fully exploit this status due to lack of funds. Possibilities for outgoing mobility do exist, especially within the framework of various international funding programmes, however they are not fully exploited. With regard to incoming mobility, the team learned that the attractiveness of UM was limited, although there may be potential to attract foreign students from the Balkan region.

In light of these findings, *the team recommends that UM develops a strategy for internationalisation, which could include aspects such as increasing student and staff mobility, exploring opportunities offered by foreign funding programmes, e.g. scholarship programmes, enhancing the capacity of the international office, or exploring the networking capabilities of its owners towards forming partnerships with foreign institutions.*

8. Conclusion

UM is a developing institution with a defined mission and vision. The team recognises the difficult conditions in which UM operates, in a higher education system that is unfamiliar with private universities and in a time of global economic crisis. Despite this, the team applauds the university and its dedicated staff for their pioneering efforts to contribute to the development of Montenegrin higher education. The team hopes that the evaluation process and the recommendations in this report will prove helpful in supporting UM in its future development. Finally, the team reiterates its recommendations that the owners of the university make a long-term investment into this promising institution, so as to ensure stability and allow the university to work towards achieving its potential.

Summary of the recommendations

Governance and institutional decision-making

- The team encourages close collaboration, on an equal basis, between the financial and academic leadership, with regard to developing plans, including annual budgets.
- The team finds it of utmost importance for UM to adopt a long-term strategic and business plan, developed through close collaboration between the owners and the academic leadership. These plans should outline the priority action areas for UM within its financial circumstances, set clear timelines and define the resources necessary for the implementation.
- The team encourages the UM leadership to devote maximum effort to securing a university building and equipping it appropriately.
- The team urges UM to focus in the immediate future on fully putting into practice the governing documents that it has already developed and on communicating these better to the academic community.
- The team would welcome greater student involvement in UM governance. The team also encourages the members of the Student Parliament to be more proactive in contributing to the governance of UM, through their already existing role in these bodies.
- The team encourages the central administration to enhance the sharing of information between faculties and the propagation of good practices across the university.
- The team encourages Atlas Group to make a long-term investment into this promising institution.

Teaching and learning

- The team recommends that UM continues to develop the structure of its programmes according to the Bologna principles.
- The team encourages UM to continue good work they are doing in transforming the teaching and learning process towards being student-centred, including their efforts to develop learning outcomes.
- In order to enhance the flexibility of learning paths, the team recommends that UM considers enriching the set of possible electives offered to students.
- The team recommends that UM introduces the role of academic advisers in order to help guide and support students throughout their study progression.
- The team encourages UM to systematise its approach to student internships. This should include assisting students in finding internships and making them an essential part of the study experience. In this respect UM should explore the privilege of being directly linked to a group of businesses, which could lead to mutual benefits of increased service to society and easier student placements.
- The team recommends that UM reduces the teaching workload of the staff.
- The team urges UM to consider ways of creating an environment which would attract more full-time staff.
- UM should develop a clear Human Resources Strategy which could, e.g. outline the support that staff can expect with respect to their career paths, research activity and professional development.
- The team recommends that UM draws on its existing human resources and the good practices they use for the professional development of all its staff, e.g. by offering pedagogical training or mentoring of junior staff members by senior staff.

Research

- The team encourages UM to continue in the positive direction of developing a Research Centre, especially in continuing its efforts to develop a research culture at UM.
- The team recommends that, under the guidance of the Research Centre, UM develops a research strategy.
- The team recommends that UM redoubles its effort to communicate the opportunities available to staff from the UM budget for financial support to research activities and professional development of staff.

- The team encourages UM to enhance the sharing of information within the university so as to help staff exploit existing and upcoming funding programmes that are available to build up their research infrastructure, as they have been doing to a certain extent already.
- The team encourages UM staff to make their research results more visible by considering increasing their publications in international journals.
- The team recommends that UM includes the development of future PhD study programmes in its long-term plans.

Service to society

- The team encourages UM to enhance its interaction with external institutions and bodies, as well as to systematically track its alumni, in order to be more aware of the labour market.
- The team urges UM to capitalise on its good network of partner organisations and the reputation of its individual staff to further build up its profile, and to attract more students, as well as to create opportunities for generating additional income.
- The team supports UM in its plans to strengthen its activities in lifelong learning, and encourages UM to use lifelong learning as an opportunity to contact prospective students.

Quality culture

- The team urges UM to pay more attention to closing the feedback loop, by actively communicating to students and staff both the feedback received and the actions taken to address it.
- The team recommends that UM uses its small size and closeness of students and staff to develop alternative models of collecting feedback, e.g. allowing some modification of questionnaires per faculty or using focus groups in addition to questionnaires.
- The team encourages UM to introduce formal and systematic tracking of their alumni as an additional quality assurance procedure in order to ensure that the goals of the programme are achieved.
- The team recommends that UM explores ways of ensuring that part-time staff is not a missing part of its quality culture.
- The team recommends that UM uses the absence of strictly defined external QA indicators to develop its own internal quality assurance system, which can be tailor-made for its needs.

Internationalisation

- The team recommends that UM develops a strategy for internationalisation, which could include aspects such as: increasing student and staff mobility, exploring opportunities offered by foreign funding programmes, e.g. scholarship programmes, enhancing the capacity of the international office, or exploring the networking capabilities of Atlas Group towards forming partnerships with foreign institutions.