

The background features a stylized graphic on the left side. It includes a large orange graduation cap (mortarboard) with a white tassel hanging down. Below the cap are several overlapping silhouettes of people in shades of blue and grey, suggesting a group of students or graduates. The overall design is clean and modern, using a color palette of blues, greys, and orange.

PASCL Report

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1. The PASCL Project

The PASCL Project aims to assist the implementation of sound student-centred learning (SCL) strategies and approaches at institutional level and to foster a culture of SCL in higher education institutions across Europe. The PASCL consortium is coordinated by ESU – the European Students’ Union; its other members are: UNICA – Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe, FIER - the Finnish Institute for Educational Research, CEU- the Central European University, Melius s.r.l, and KIC – Knowledge Innovation Centre.

The PASCL peer assessment is based on the tradition of enhancement-led evaluation. Assessment in this context means the aim of supporting higher education institutions to develop their SCL activities in dialogue and interaction with them. The aim of the peer assessment is to help the participating institutions recognize their best practices with regards to student-centred learning and to develop their educational philosophy and practices related to teaching, learning and student participation. The aim is to help the institution concerned to analyse its own practices and to consider ways in which those can be improved or changed in case the institution wishes to become more student-centred. The peer assessment process is based on open discussions between the peer assessment team and the participating institution. The most important benefit to the participating institution is its own contemplation, with the peer assessment team working as a catalyst of this process.

The following definition of student-centred learning adopted by the PASCL partners forms the basis for the PASCL peer assessment:

“Student-Centred Learning represents both a mind-set and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterised by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking.” (T4SCL Toolkit 2010).

Student-Centred Learning Toolkit for Students, Staff and Higher Education Institutions’ published as a part of the project ‘Time for a New Paradigm in Education: Student-Centred Learning’ funded with support from the European Commission

2. The PASCL peer-assessment process

The PASCL peer-assessment process includes four steps: training, preparation of the visit, peer assessment visit and feedback session:

- 1) The training aims to provide the peer assessment teams and the representatives of the hosting institutions with the procedures and goals of the peer assessment visits, as well as clarify the philosophy of student-centred learning and enhancement-led evaluation.
- 2) In the preparation stage the participating institution prepares a short set of background information for the peer assessment team comprising the description of the institution's organizational structure and its teaching and learning philosophy.
- 3) During the peer assessment visit, the peer assessment team meets with various actors and stakeholders in the university, such as the institution's leadership, faculties, quality assurance actors, support services, teachers and students.
- 4) After the visit, the peer assessment team writes a short report describing the practices, of the institution concerning the elements of student-centred learning and make a set of recommendations for further improvement. After the visit and writing of the report, a joint feedback session will be organized for the peer assessment team and participating institution either on Skype or in person during which they can jointly think of ways to implement the recommendations. The session also offers a possibility for the institution to give feedback on the peer assessment process.

3. The peer-assessment visit

The peer assessment visit of Riga Stradins University (RSU) took place on 15-16 February 2016. The assessment team consisted of three members: LLM student Simona Dimovska from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia (member of Steering Committee of European Students' Union quality assurance pool of experts); Monika Skadborg, member of the Executive Committee of the National Union of Students in Denmark, and Matyas Szabo, higher education senior manager at Central European University in Budapest (chair of the visiting team). The coordinator of the visit and contact person at RSU was Sarmite Zeire, project manager for Study Programme Development at RSU Study Department.

The visit focused on two faculties, suggested by RSU and agreed upon with the visiting team: The Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Communication. The team visited the main campus of the university, including the library, student services, classrooms, laboratories, as well as two other educational facilities: The Medical Education Technology Centre and the RSU Institute of Anatomy and Anthropology (Anatomikum).

The team conducted 10 interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 42 representatives of RSU, including two vice-rectors, three deans, 10 teachers and 15 students from the two faculties, as well as 12 managerial and administrative support staff.

This report is based on the background report received from RSU prior to the visit, materials collected during interviews and focus groups, and information gathered from RSU webpages.

The visiting team would like to express our deep gratitude for the hospitality of RSU, the open and honest discussions we had with all representatives of the university, and the overall good organization of our stay in Riga. We specially thank Vice-Rector Tatjana Koke for her engagement, openness and true commitment to the success of the peer-assessment visit, as well as Sarmite Zeire for the excellent preparation and organization of the visit.

The report comprises of several focus areas and for each of these a short description of the university's practices is provided, highlighting good practices and strengths, and offering suggestions and recommendations in the given area.

4. Riga Stradins University

Rīga Stradiņš University (RSU) was established in 1950 under the name of Riga Medical Institute. In 1990, the Institute was renamed Medical Academy of Latvia while in 1998 – when social sciences have also started to be taught – it gained its current name. RSU is a state founded university, the only university in Latvia that has traditionally been integrated in the healthcare system of the country. The university is autonomous and academically free to pursue its goals and tasks, working for the benefit of the state and society, and offering a wide array of academic and professional education and research opportunities in the fields of healthcare, social care, social sciences and natural sciences. The university also has a branch on the western coast of Latvia (the Liepaja Branch) which gives an opportunity for youth from the western region of Latvia to obtain qualitative medical education, without changing their place of residence.

RSU's mission is to create opportunities for student to become highly qualified experts in the fields of healthcare and social sciences, so that they can serve individuals and the society of Latvia, the European Union, as well as the world. The university's vision is grounded on the principles of:

- 1) social responsibility (to benefit the workplace, the labour market, community and environment through teaching, research, public events and other activities);
- 2) openness (towards both future students and the professional field);
- 3) flexibility and accessibility (both in its planning of study – modular system – and in combination of various methods of teaching and learning);
- 4) freedom, independence and creative expression of the student (in discussions, independent research and creative works);
- 5) collaboration (between students in groups, different disciplines and students and teaching/administrative staff);
- 6) high standards of education (demanding requirements and permanent monitoring of current students' success, balancing theoretical and practical studies) involving high cultural values (encouraging personal cultural development outside the taught curriculum)
- 7) individual approach and discussion (discussion based elaboration of curricula)

In Academic Year 2014-2015, RSU offered 64 study programs that are divided into 9 study directions (in brackets are the number of programs, BA, MA and PhD, in the given study direction): Education, Pedagogy and Sport (2), Healthcare (32), Information and Communication Sciences (6), Law (5), Management, Administration and Management of Real Estate (4), Psychology (2), Life Sciences (1), Social Welfare (3) and Sociology, Political Science and Anthropology (9).

In Academic Year 2014-2015 there were 7874 students enrolled at RSU, 1761 of them are international students and 6113 local Latvian students. International students constitute approximately 21 percent of the entire student body, the majority of them are enrolled in the medical faculty.

The university has 12 scientific structural units (institutes and laboratories) among them the Medical Education Technology Centre, which is the most advanced medical education centre in the Baltics. At this centre students acquire knowledge, abilities and skills for working with patients by learning on phantoms and simulators – starting from simple manipulations to complicated surgical operations, even deliveries. The methods used for studies allow each student to acquire the necessary technical abilities and skills, as well as self-confidence to take care effectively and cooperate with patients in the future.

5. Students' involvement in university governance

Description

The visiting team found it evident that students play an important role in all aspects of the university's governance. They constitute a significant 20 percent in the most important decision-making bodies of the university, such as the Senate and the Constitutional Assembly, and are also present in the Deans' Council, Faculty Councils, Study Quality Council and the Academic Arbitration Court. The rights and interests of students are represented by the Student Council, an independent university body democratically elected yearly by enrolled students. The council has a total number of 36 members representing all faculties of the university, 9 board members and 1 chairperson, who is paid for his/her work. The council is provided with a budget which allows it to organize various events, projects, and activities that are meant to improve the quality of students' life on campus.

Foreign students have their own student organization, the International Students' Association (established 5 years ago), which aims to represent the specific needs of international students, and well as help improve their lives at RSU. They cooperate tightly with the RSU Student Council, the International Office, and the Deans of different faculties. They are also elected every year, but because of language barriers they are not formally part of university meetings. In those meetings they are represented by their Latvian colleagues with whom they have a very good communication.

Cooperation and communication between staff and students is smooth, group leaders and semester leaders regularly exchange views with leadership and administration.

Strengths

Besides the official, planned meetings within the officially elected university bodies, students regularly meet with both academic and administrative staff, whenever it is required. As they formulated it in meetings with the visiting team: they are considered to be "true partners," and therefore "all doors are open" for them. Their opinion is considered to be important, and they feel that they are consulted on all important matters. Foreign students, who have a comparative perspective, believe that RSU is truly student centred, students' voices are heard, they are always asked for feedback.

A strong evidence of the importance students' voice is given at RSU and the power they have at the highest institutional level, is their veto right in Senate. All members of the Senate

strive to reach a consensus by thorough discussions before voting, therefore in recent year there was no occasion when student would have needed to use their veto right.

Communication between students and staff is intensive and open, students' e-mails are answered in a timely manner, academic and administrative staff are approachable and open to discuss students' concerns.

Recommendations

The visiting team recorded some concerns that students of social sciences are not given equal importance in the university's governance, they feel that medical students are consulted more often and are given more opportunities to express their views. It is recommended, therefore, that the university pays attention to the inclusion of all student representatives in major discussions, making sure that the opinion of the students from social sciences has an important weight in the decision-making processes.

It was also mentioned that not all students in the university are aware of their rights and responsibilities, therefore it is suggested that administrative staff and student representatives work together in regularly reminding all students about those important instances in which their active participation, suggestions and feedback is required.

Despite the overall very good cooperation and communication with students, the administration does not always seem to inform students about proposed solutions or strategies found to address their specific requests. There were a few instances in the past when students' requests were fulfilled ("the problem was fixed") without informing them about the solutions found. It is important therefore to send confirmation messages to student representatives whenever the administration or management of the university successfully addresses their concerns.

6. Students in quality assurance

Description

Quality assurance processes at RSU are regulated by international standards and by national laws issued by the Latvian Cabinet of Ministers. The university prepares annually a self-assessment report on all of its study programs, a process that is led by heads of study programs. Besides classroom observations, and faculty self-assessment reports, an important element of the evaluation process is the analysis of student questionnaires. Once a year students complete study program assessment questionnaires, which are analysed by heads of study programs, assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the program. At the end of each course attended, students complete an electronic on-line evaluation questionnaire (available also in English for international students). Results of the surveys are summarized and analysed automatically in the system.

The deans of the Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Communication regularly meet senior students and whenever necessary, also convoke extraordinary meetings – in form of focus groups - with representatives of students. In order to assess the experience of teaching international students, identify past achievements and growth opportunities, in the 2014-2015 academic year the university also conducted a special study on RSU's internationalization.

The university has recently set up a working group – also including representatives of students – that aims to develop a document on quality criteria for the Faculty of Medicine. It is planned that a similar, revised document will also be developed for other study programs.

Strengths

Students at RSU are genuinely involved in all processes of quality assurance, both through their representatives in various bodies and groups, but also directly through open consultations, regular discussions with deans, heads of departments and of study programs. They are also represented in the working groups that are developing criteria for quality of study programs.

Improving the quality assurance measures is one of the main priorities in the university, and students are highly involved in all the ongoing processes. The content and administration of student questionnaires is currently improved by a working group that involves both students and representatives of academic and administrative staff. Their willingness to cooperate and achieve a significant progress in this area is obvious, both students and staff are very open for new ideas, suggestions, strategies. All involved parties are aware that the improvement

of the questionnaire is necessary in order to receive significant feedback from a large number of students and obtain more comprehensive information on courses. Faculty members are also given the opportunity to add their own questions to the surveys in order to make the suggestions of students more directly useful for individual courses and lecturers.

It is also an important strength of the university that it has a special Study Department that coordinates all efforts related to study programs: it collects and analyses information from both students and faculty through surveys, meetings with students and academic staff, and is also responsible for leading the process of working groups on developing quality criteria for programs.

Recommendations

There is a high concern among students, faculty and staff members on the low response rate in case of the existing on-line student surveys. Students believe that one reason for the low response rate is their dissatisfaction with the lack of feedback they receive on the results of questionnaires and on the subsequent steps departments take based on the results. Some students feel that their suggestions do not really matter, and there are no significant changes after the questionnaires are analysed.

Some students also expressed concerns that the current processes do not assure full anonymity (questionnaires are often filled in in computer labs with faculty members present and “walking behind them”) and therefore are afraid that their comments and suggestions might negatively affect their further studies. For their part, some faculty members expressed their concern that besides being asked to complete the course evaluation questionnaires students are requested to participate in a variety of different other types of surveys, which reduces their overall interest in taking all surveys seriously.

It is recommended therefore that the university continues its efforts in the following:

- Coordinate all different types of mechanisms of collecting feedback from students, and guarantee that they are done in a timely manner and with a frequency that does not jeopardize students’ commitment to be involved in quality assurance processes;
- Creating conditions for the filling out of questionnaires that assure full anonymity;
- inform students about the processes of the analysis of surveys and more importantly the impact of their answers, changes triggered by their suggestions or areas where changes are expected in the future;
- analyse the case of departments where response rate is relatively high and use those experiences and practices to review other cases of low response rates;

- address the concerns that students are not fully aware of the criteria based on which students in quality assurance working groups are selected by deans and program heads.

7. Support services

Description

The university has a variety of well-developed and functioning support services available or offered to both students and faculty members that contribute to the further development of student centred approaches and practices.

Financial support is available for students in form of state scholarships offered to some 60 percent of Latvian students enrolled in the university's medical faculty. In the communication faculty there are no students financed by the state, but the university is able to offer a very limited number of merit-based scholarships.

The university also provides housing support to its students: they are provided rooms in one of the 3 dormitories of the university for a reasonable fee on a first-come-first-served basis, or are helped to find accommodation in Riga through local agencies. International students, particularly those coming from outside EU are given priority in the dormitory. A list of rental agencies with whom the university and former students had good experience is available on-line to incoming students, and at the beginning of each academic year a fair is organized with the participation of rental agencies. The university is building a new campus that will also have a modern dormitory.

The Student Services includes the functions of an information centre and a one-stop agency. Its main task is to provide assistance and services to current and prospective students with respect to the study process (issuing student identity cards, references and certificates, compiling timetables, etc.) and provide them with general information regarding the university's units, their locations and visiting hours.

A student-driven initiative for welcoming new students also exists at RSU. This is in the form of a series of events where new students receive guidance and advice from already enrolled students, and have the opportunity to build a network of friends from the very first days of their enrolment.

During their studies students have free access to the subscribed international databases and other electronic resources (for example, E-books: Ebrary e-books, EBSCO; E-magazines:

Proquest, SAGE, Wiley Online Library and other resources) through the university's library, and receive training on how to use these resources. The university also ensures an up-to-date infrastructure for using and further developing e-learning and flexible access to learning tools, so students can plan their self-study.

The university has recently introduced a mentoring program at the faculty of medicine, which is carried out by young teachers and focuses on helping students at the beginning of their education overcome the difficulties of adjusting to university life and cope with the high demands of their curriculum. Topics that students can get help on include time management and ways to prioritize their learning.

Students with mental health problems are offered psychological counselling either for free at the university's Career Centre by a qualified psychologist (who is a Career Centre employee), or for a reduced price at a RSU Clinic of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy. This initiative is particularly used by students during stressful exam periods, and by international students at the beginning of their stay in Latvia.

RSU also offers continuous career advice to its students, in form of individual consultations and through presentations offered by invited potential future employers. At the beginning of each academic year there is a job fair organized by the university, where students can learn about employment opportunities, internships. The Student Services also has a website with job vacancies.

A special informal educational program, called Academy of Intelligence, was established by RSU to offer social skills to students and staff members. The aim of the program is to offer a set of knowledge and skills that are not developed by academic education, but are vital in the growth of person or are key elements for career development, such as knowledge about art, culture, music, etiquette, behavioural culture, dancing skills etc.

Faculty at RSU also benefit from professional support and training that they receive from the Centre for Educational Growth, established in September 2014. The centre developed a professional development package for teachers, which consists of 40 percent theoretical input into teaching (training sessions in English for academic writing, video editing, using the Turnitin software, using IT in teaching, etc.), 30 percent exchange of experience (discussions, roundtables on best practices in teaching) and 30 percent teachers' self-organized experience (attending conferences, seminars on teaching, study trips, etc.). The program is mandatory for all teachers, it consists of 160 hours and needs to be completed within a 6-year period.

Strengths

Students interviewed during the peer-assessment visit agreed unanimously that support services are working very well at RSU. The staff of the Student Services are always very helpful, quick, very open and ready to help even in extraordinary situations. The mentoring program introduced at the medical faculty and the psychological services available to all students were also described as very beneficial. International students from Western European countries - who have a comparative perspective on education that results from their experiences at home and at RSU – said the education and support services at RSU are more student-centred than at their home universities. Students who live in one of the dormitories of the universities said the overall quality of the dormitories is good (though some newer buildings offer better living conditions than older ones).

The existence of the Centre for Educational Growth and the programs they offer, as well as the possibility for teachers to receive grants for improving their teaching and the courses they teach, are clear indications that the university is committed to constantly improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are also supported by regular classroom visits done by their more experienced peers, followed by discussions, exchange of ideas on how to improve students' classroom experiences. It is also a good practice that all activities in matters related to improve one's teaching are monitored and acknowledged by the university and are taken into consideration when faculty members are re-appointed by the Senate.

Recommendations

In order to improve further the already existing high-level support services, the visiting team suggests the following:

- Complement the existing merit-based scholarships offered to students from the faculty of communications with tuition waivers and scholarships that are need-based (the team is aware that such help is currently sought for through private foundations). Such a move would assure that students from disadvantaged groups could benefit from access to higher education at RSU and would also promote inclusive education
- Consider the introduction of a housing policy that would give priority to certain groups of students over others when distributing places in the dormitory. Currently the first come first served rule is applied, and at least for the time being it seems to be working without major concerns. However, in order to help those in more need, priority could be given to first year students over more mature students, student who live outside the capital city over those from Riga, students from third countries over EU students, etc. Some of these rules are already applied in practice but in order to

make the system fully transparent, a policy on housing should be developed and made known to all students (this is particularly important now, when a new campus with a modern and more expensive dormitory is being built by the university)

- Monitor the personal development and career paths of RSU graduates by conducting regular alumni surveys through the university's Alumni Association, and identify the areas where further support and development is needed in order to increase the employability of graduates
- Complement the existing career advice services with regular trainings offered to students on increasing their chances of employment (for instance trainings in CV and project writing, presentation skills, job interviews, etc.) and develop a database of existing employment and internship opportunities
- Consider the option of expanding the types of trainings offered by the Centre for Educational Growth and include other areas that would help teachers make their teaching more student centred, such as: how to design student-centred courses, how to formulate learning outcomes, innovative ways in assessing student learning, collaborative learning, etc.

8. Curriculum design

Description

Study programs and their learning outcomes are designed by heads of study programs, in consultation with faculty members and students, and are approved first by faculty councils, then by the deans' council and finally they should receive approval from the senate. During the whole process – which takes about one month - students are consulted, their views, expectations and reflections on their previous year's experiences are taken into account both in finalizing the list of courses offered within a given program, as well as in deciding about the content of each particular course. Feedback received from the end-of-the-year course evaluations are taken into account when designing new courses, the content of some courses is modified according to students' suggestions. Syllabi of all courses are reviewed regularly, and adjustments are made - in most of the cases – yearly.

In case of the medical faculty, where there is a significant number of foreign students, the mandatory part of the curriculum is the same for both Latvian and foreign students, the same teacher offers his/her course both in Latvian and in English. The list of optional (elective) courses is different, special elective courses are offered for particular groups of foreign students, such as tropical diseases, for instance.

Courses are developed and taught by resident faculty, as well as external experts and professionals.

Strengths

All interviewees told members of the visiting team that there is a good cooperation between faculty, staff and students in developing courses and curricula, and that students are indeed involved in all steps of the process. Consultations and discussions on the content of curricula are taking place regularly, deans and heads of study programs are striving to achieve a consensus on the content of courses and curricula before these are approved in decision-making bodies of the university.

The university has recently given priority – also as a result of students' suggestions - to the introduction of inter-disciplinary, cross-listed courses. Besides the obvious benefits of such courses, the initiative would also strengthen the cooperation between the various study programs, and would give the opportunity to students studying in different faculties to get to know each other and cooperate more intensively.

Local Latvian and international students have the opportunity to choose whether to study in national or international groups or in mixed groups. This new possibility – that already has a two-year history – is received very positively by students: it gives an opportunity to local Latvian students to improve their English, while international students can learn Latvian, which is important when practicing with local patients.

Recommendations

During discussions with both students and faculty members, the team noted that there was some dissatisfaction regarding the format and content of syllabi. Teachers complained that the process of filling out and submitting syllabi templates has become rather bureaucratic, there are too many forms to be filled out, and there is also confusion about the purposes of the various templates. Students also mentioned that there is a great variety in the overall quality of syllabi, in some cases the learning outcomes are not properly defined or are too vague, not all syllabi describe requirements and criteria for grading. There is gradual improvement and visible progress in the quality of syllabi, students said, adding that the overall quality of a given syllabus depends on the experience and seriousness of the teacher.

The team therefore recommends that the university continues with its efforts to develop a single version of standardized template for syllabi that serves both academic and administrative purposes. The Centre for Educational Growth could assist less experienced teachers and external lecturers in writing student-centred syllabi, formulating proper course requirements, learning outcomes, grading criteria. Course design and syllabus writing short training sessions or roundtables should become part of the offerings of the Centre.

Although most students are satisfied with the structure and the workload distribution of study programs, they suggested that minor adjustments could be made. In the medical faculty it seems that the workload is very heavy before the pre-clinical period in the curriculum, and the content of courses – with some exceptions - is often too theoretical. Acknowledging the difficulty and limitations to change the very standardized medical curriculum, the university could try to offer practical sessions to students as early as possible, without jeopardizing the quality and intensity of the strong theoretical basis needed in medical education.

As for the faculty of communications, students' view is that courses offered by invited professionals are often more interesting, more practical than those offered by resident faculty, as these courses are using examples from the "real world", develop practical skills, and are giving students a broader perspective on their knowledge. Other courses are sometimes too academic, with no case studies, too theoretical. It was also suggested that an

element of internship could also be introduced not only in the third year, but perhaps also earlier in the studies. Access to the in-house media lab is possible, however, the lab is often overcrowded and students often need to wait long in order to have access to the equipment. The workload seems to be too heavy in the first year, while in the third year it is too light, at least according to some of the students interviewed.

Regarding elective courses, students' views within medical faculty and faculty of communications differ quite significantly. Due to the more rigid standards in medical education, in this faculty there is only a very limited possibility for students to also complete elective courses. Each year there are 7-10 elective courses offered to students (including English language, sport classes, and a few special medical courses), but students often only take one elective per academic year. As for the faculty of communications, the existence of elective courses largely depends on the availability of invited external professionals.

The most significant issue that should be addressed when designing the curriculum for the faculty of communication is that of a more evenly distributed weekly schedule. Currently there are significant gaps between classroom-hours, and the distribution of workload over the days of the week is rather uneven, in some cases even chaotic. Students also noted that due the larger number of external lecturers, and the last-minute arrangements made with them, students receive their weekly schedules only a few days in advance. Such a practice makes it difficult for students to plan their work and free time in a timely manner, and therefore their studies are often becoming chaotic.

The visiting team therefore recommends that the university tries to implement the following:

- Continue its efforts to distribute the workload of students more evenly between study years;
- Whenever possible introduce practical work, case studies, internships, simulations, etc. already in the first and second years of studies (such a practice exist in most study programs);
- provide students with their weekly schedules as much in advance as possible, and whenever possible avoid big gaps in the schedule

9. Teaching and learning, assessment, feedback to students

Description

The teaching and learning culture at RSU has changed significantly in the past 10-15 years, but the peculiarity of medical studies – rather rigid disciplinary standards and need for a large body of knowledge to be memorized - does not always allow the implementation of SCL practices at the faculty of medicine. According to the self-assessment report of the university, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge mainly takes place in the form of lectures in large auditoriums. Cooperative learning is less integrated, independent studies represent a relatively small proportion, and there are many contact lessons. Size of classes in general is larger in social sciences, as medical education often requires smaller groups.

The classes that focus on the development of specific skills take place in forms of seminars and laboratories with a smaller group of students. In the Medical Education Technology Centre for healthcare studies, for instance, students gain the skills necessary in various clinical scenarios, by using phantoms, dummies, simulators and simulated patients.

The university has recently started to integrate modern technologies into the study processes, such as the Panopto system (for recording and digitizing the lectures), the e-learning platform Moodle (for access to course materials), webinars, electronic resources, the Turnitin software to monitor the originality of students' papers, etc.

Regarding assessment of student learning, the university uses a variety of assessment methods, teachers have the freedom to choose the ways they wish to measure students' learning and the fulfilment of learning outcomes.

Strengths

The university is committed to introduce SCL approaches, significant improvement and ongoing efforts in this direction have been noted by the visiting team. Most auditoriums at RSU are equipped with modern technology using the Panopto system, allowing the recording and digitization of lectures. Together with Moodle, these technologies ensure the possibility to increase the proportion and efficiency of students' independent studies, allows them to access materials from outside the campus, prepare in advance for classes.

The university considers it a priority to constantly improve the electronic and online learning facilities and the further development of the Universum on-line comprehensive student

portal. The facilities that exist for developing practical skills of medical students include a wide range of modern equipment, giving the students the possibility to gain hands-on experiences with using medical equipment and building their confidence before starting to practice with real patients. Students are very satisfied with this opportunity, and it is particularly important to note that access to these facilities is also granted outside teaching hours, and often on weekends, too.

Students from both the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Communication mentioned that there is a visible effort made by most teachers to increase students' active participation during classes. Students are encouraged to take part in discussions, and are often preparing presentations. Most teachers are always ready to engage in debates with students, and are approachable also outside teaching hours. Students from the Faculty of Communication expressed their appreciation for teachers who are able to engage the whole class in discussions, rather than simply presenting the new material to students.

Besides the regular classes, students also have other opportunities to engage in discussions and debates on topics of their interests: many departments organize student conferences and roundtables.

Students described their teachers as generally willing to go into discussions about the content of the lectures and seminars and on ways to improve their teaching. Especially referring to the small classes and the later years of studies (when students have gained more confidence in the subject), students described teaching as "an open dialogue." With a student/teacher ratio of approximately 12:1, there are good possibilities of ensuring sufficient contact hours in small classes with room for interaction.

It is also a good practice that students have the option to take the exam earlier during the semester, the existing modular system at the medical faculty allows students to have exams at different points in time.

Recommendations

Students interviewed during the visit acknowledged that they should play a more active role in making the teaching and learning experience more student centred at RSU, by participating more actively during discussions, using more frequently the facilities available, and giving more substantial feedback to teachers on their teaching.

In discussion that the peer assessment team had with students the following issues have been identified as areas where the university could make further progresses:

1. In case of some teachers who are also practicing medical doctors the priority is often their clinical work rather than teaching. As “good doctors are not always good teachers,” the team agrees with students’ suggestions that some minimum standards for lecturing need to be introduced. This could be done, for instance, by inviting practitioners to co-teach their courses with another colleague who is more skilful and/or experienced in teaching, or offer them some basic training/consultancy (through classroom observations and feedback). The team is aware that this is a delicate matter, and therefore it should be approached case-by-case.
2. The team also recommends that deans and program heads are making an effort to coordinate not only the aims and content of courses, but also the variety of tasks teachers are asking students to complete, making sure that there is a wide range of them (writing papers, group projects, oral presentations, etc.) and that the distribution of tasks is more or less evenly distributed throughout the semester.
3. According to student representatives, about half of all students in the medical faculty are fully satisfied with the way the Panopto system of video recording is functioning and are frequently accessing recorded lectures. The other half of students believe that recording the lectures in fact takes away classroom interaction, and they wish they could participate more actively and have the opportunity to interrupt the lecturer and ask questions. Despite the good aspect of being able to watch the recorded lecture many times and outside the campus, students mentioned that most lectures are edited and are rarely available in their full length. The team therefore recommends that in order to make the Panopto more efficient, the university should try to explore further possibilities of the system to capture all aspects of interactive lectures so that students benefit more from the recordings.
4. The equipment available at the Medical Education Technology Centre and the RSU Institute of Anatomy and Anthropology should be used more frequently by students, as it seems that the current capacity of trained staff limits the frequent use of these facilities. If possible, the university could try to train more staff members in using the high-level, modern technology available, allowing and encouraging students to benefit more from the availability of these unique machines.

5. The interviewed students in both faculties agreed that the current system of non-standardized assessment is good, there is no need to make the system more standardized. The criteria based in which students' work is assessed, however, should be made explicit and more transparent, particularly because scholarships available for some students is merit based. Whenever possible, exams should be made anonymous, and each exam session should have a set of new questions (sometimes it happens that the same set of exam questions are given to students taking the exam at the beginning of the exam period and also at the end of it, which students consider to be unfair).

6. Some teachers seem not to give explanations or feedback to students on the grade received, or only give collective feedback to the whole group of students. In order to provide the possibility to students to improve their learning, a more personalized (and whenever possible written) feedback should be offered to each student individually, particularly in case of more demanding writing assignments, projects and presentations. Teachers do not have enough time to provide proper feedback to students, the time spent on providing feedback should be taken into account when calculating their hours of work.

10. Conclusions

The visiting team was impressed by the already existing level of student-centredness at RSU, and by the awareness of its leadership and management of the areas where further improvements are needed and possible. Students, faculty and staff have shown a high degree of understanding of student-centredness and presented a realistic picture of the current level of its implementation. Representatives of the university interviewed during the visit have shown a high level of self-criticism, and openly talked about existing problems and difficulties they face.

The university has a good strategy on increasing the overall quality of education, which has several priorities pertaining to student-centred learning, such as:

- Recruit a diverse group of national and international students;
- Offer more scholarships to students who do not benefit from the government' financial support;
- Lower the tuition fee to allow a larger number of students to enrol;
- Introduce interdisciplinary and cross-listed courses, and launch joint programs with other universities;
- Further develop students' access to on-line teaching materials;
- Develop a close cooperation with future employers of students;
- Involve students in identifying criteria to evaluate the overall quality of study programs;
- Support the professional development of faculty members, with emphasis on improving their teaching.

The team feels that most of the recommendations formulated in earlier section of this report can be implemented in a relatively short time, given the existing readiness, commitment and capacity at RSU.