

The background features a light blue gradient. On the left, there is a large, stylized graphic of a graduation cap with an orange top and a white tassel. Below and to the right of the cap are several overlapping, semi-transparent silhouettes of people in various shades of blue and grey, suggesting a group of students or faculty.

PASCL Report

Asnate Kažoka, Inguna Zariņa and Pusa Nastase

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1. The PASCL project

The PASCL – Peer Assessment of Student-Centred Learning – project aims to assist in implementing 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 and its other members are UNICA – the Institutional 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 project is funded with support of the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme.

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 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 to analyse its own practices and to consider ways in which those can be changed, if the institution wants to become more student-centred. The peer assessment process is based on open discussions between the peer assessment team and the participating institution. The biggest 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^[1]).

2 The PASCL evaluation process

The PASCL evaluation process comprises 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 the teaching and learning philosophy.
- 3) During the peer assessment visit, the peer assessment team will meet 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 will write a short report describing the practices, strengths and weaknesses of the institution with regards to 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.

The peer-assessment visit to Singidunum University took place between February 29 and March 1, 2016. The international peer assessment team comprised three members. The team was chaired by Asnate Kažoka from the Latvian Quality Assurance Agency. The representative of consortium partners was Dr. Pusa Nastase from the Central European University in Budapest, and the representative of students was Ms. Inguna Zariņa from University of Latvia.

The team met with the representatives of university leadership, deans, teachers and students, as the representatives of career services, IT support and other support services related to teaching and learning. We are grateful for the kind attention and candid discussions during the visit. The team would like to thank particularly to Dr. Verka Jovanović - Deputy for University International Cooperation and Dr. Tijana Radojević, Vice-Dean and to Dušan Borovčanin.

3. Singidunum University

The **Singidunum University** (hereafter the university) mission is defined as follows:

Singidunum University is a higher education institution devoted to excellence in teaching, learning and research, and to producing leaders in many disciplines who could make a difference globally. It boasts modern curricula and teaching methods resembling those of the renowned university centres. The main mission of the University has always been to enable transfer of contemporary knowledge, methods and scientific techniques used at the well-established European university centres and to empower young people to be competitive in the market and keep pace with the contemporary tendencies and business trends. In order to achieve that, it places special emphasis on the following segments: 1) continuous enhancement of quality of studies, curricula and working conditions; 2) encouraging students to take an active part in all teaching and non-teaching activities within the University; 3) development of scientific-research work; 4) encouraging innovativeness in teaching and research; 5) rational distribution and use of resources.

The governance of the university is relatively centralised with the University Council being primarily responsible for the overall management of the university and the Rector and Deans overseeing all academic matters. Students are represented in all decisions making bodies including the University Council and the Quality Assurance Committee and are regularly consulted through the Student parliament, a separate body that advises the university leadership on all student related matters.

4. Structure and management

Singidunum University's management structure includes University Council and Senate, President, Rector, Faculty Deans, Quality Assurance Committee and Student Parliament.

The central administration and faculties of Singidunum are located in Belgrade but there are also branches in Novi Sad and Niš. Singidunum has Faculty of Business, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Informatics and Computing and Faculty of Technical Sciences.

The Rector has been in this position for 12 years and according to the interviews he has earned the respect of the university community through his dedication to the university and its students.

The president holds the prerogatives regarding the financial matters, similar to the structure found in other private universities.

During the visit, the team noticed that there is a strong feeling of belonging to Singidunum among the whole university society that indicates the management of Singidunum is putting a considerable effort in positioning the university and ensuring that the university society is happy.

All informants seemed to be in full knowledge of the university decision processes and aware of the opportunities available to influence it.

Based on the available evidence the team was of the opinion that the decision making structure of the university allows both students and staff to make suggestions for the improvement of the educational process.

The team also noticed that there is a number of good initiatives and policies throughout the Singidunum (in faculties, separate study courses, Students' Parliament) but they would need to be shared across the university and institutionalised. Additional attention should be paid to the branches of Singidunum in Novi Sad and Niš to ensure that all the university level policies are also followed up there and that the branches are included in the overall management process.

The team agreed that students play an important role in the management of the university. Through the Students Parliament, students are represented in all the governance structures although the students do not have Veto power in any of the bodies they are represented in. As a suggestion, the team recommends that Students Parliament is granted its own set annual budget which they can manage independently and allocate according to their priorities.

Conclusions

The decision making structure is clear and fairly inclusive. The community seems to be overall content with the way the university operates and its institutional culture. The team advises that while the student body is well represented and visible the autonomy of students' life is curtailed by the lack of set budget. The university's structure seems to be functional and suitable for the size and the profile of Singidunum University.

5. Vision, policy, strategy, philosophy

Evidence from the report, the additional documents submitted by the university and the university's website points to the teaching mission as being of paramount importance for the institution. During interviews all informants including the university leaders, faculty, administrative staff and students agreed on the importance of teaching at Singidunum and stressed the value of quality teaching in attracting and retaining good students and in building a good reputation. The team noted that the importance of teaching to the institution's reputation and most importantly to the students' careers does not seem to be a mere declaration of intentions from the part of the university but also has been adopted and embraced by the teaching and support staff.

Overall the team has been positively impressed with the level of dedication to students' needs as expressed during interviews. More specifically, university staff is committed to creating the necessary conditions for Singidunum students to have a good learning environment that would allow them to become employable after their graduation. Among the strengths of the university is the articulation and internalisation of a clear sense of mission for the institution to which all the staff members met by the team seemed to adhere to. This allows faculty to align all personal and departmental agendas to the declared university mission particularly because it seems to be often reinforced by the university leadership. The common understanding of the importance of teaching and student centeredness creates a university where students are heard and their needs matter.

Conclusions

The declared university's mission as described in its official documents combines excellent teaching and transfer of knowledge to its students, research and services to the community. The peer-assessment team has found evidence that the academic community embraces the student-centred approach and is dedicated to providing a suitable learning environment for students and securing their employability.

6. Teaching and learning

In line with the university focus on employability there have been adopted several student-centred practices. Among them are the introduction of soft skills trainings that are available for all students. In another instance, students have the possibility to obtain official certification of various abilities and competencies at discounted rates or even for free. The students seemed particularly pleased with these course certificates and stressed that in the past students suggested various opportunities for certification that the university pursued.

With regard to regular courses, professors have the academic freedom to introduce new courses and revise existing ones. All academic staff indicated that courses get reviewed regularly with the purpose of making sure the content is up to date. There seems to be the practice of involving students in the teaching process and teaching methods include case studies, group and individual work, laboratories and other methods that allow students to have an active role. Students confirmed that the teaching style and methods are very inclusive and student centred but the peer-assessment team could not independently form an opinion on the matter.

Students receive each course syllabi at the beginning of the semester and they also have a week of presentations where each professor presents the course they teach. The university also gives each student a reader prepared for each individual course that includes most of the reading material for the course. The reader is regularly revised to include up to date readings and the students can make suggestions about course and the reading materials. The practice of giving out readers for each course has the benefit of helping students accessing the readings without any difficulty such as waiting for the book to be returned in the library or losing time searching and downloading materials off the internet databases. However, by giving students readers it might prevent them from learning useful skills of identifying relevant resources, discerning their importance and thinking critically about their content.

An important part of the curriculum are the mandatory internships which the students indicated as particularly useful to gain practical knowledge and get accustomed with a potential employer. Making the internships part of the curriculum can be considered a good practice in that it facilitates learning outside the classroom. The students enrolled in the joint Krems program were particularly pleased with the longer length of their internship although they signalled several difficulties in securing internships outside Serbia (discussed in detail in the Students section of the present report).

The feedback process seems to be relatively well organised with students' opinions collected regularly (each semester) and their input being integrated to improve the courses. The students also indicated that they can receive feedback on their performance during class whenever they need it by being able to reach out to their professors almost on a daily basis. The team commends the University for this student-centred policy and acknowledges that students seem to receive a high level of support. The suggestion would be for the university to make sure that students actually receive the feedback questionnaire after each course (in case they are shorter than a semester, as some of the MA and PHD courses could be) and that the data obtained from the questionnaires is not only collected but used and archived for reference on the longer run.

In terms of pedagogical training of professors, the university has an informal mentoring system in place whereby new and inexperienced professors get assigned a more experienced colleague as a mentor within the faculty in the early years of their teaching career. The system seems to work with younger professors indicating that both their mentor and the faculty Deans are available to help with teaching advice. Nevertheless, this type of informal arrangement might need to be turned into a more formal policy to avoid stretching the amount of activities required from Deans and other senior faculty but also to make sure that beginner professors get a predictable and more standardised type of support. This role could be fulfilled by a dedicated unit or department in charge of organising teaching support training and monitoring. The team recommends that the university analyses the most suitable option for having in-house support for teaching available across departments that could give junior faculty the necessary teaching training induction but could also organise regular trainings on advanced teaching methods and provide pedagogical support for all faculties.

Singidunum University has also introduced the quality of teaching as criteria for promotion - although it has assigned only 10-15 % of the total score needed for promotion with the research output counting as 50% of the score. Professors with low student satisfaction ratings need to improve their teaching before being promoted and faculty with consistent low ratings are unlikely to be considered for a higher rank. This policy confirms that the teaching mission is important for the institution and makes quality teaching mandatory for promotion within the university.

Last but not least the teaching staff and the university leadership seem to be very open to an individualised approach to teaching and learning. For instance, faculty indicated that they offer students ample time for consultations on regular, sometimes daily basis; that they organised in the past additional courses for those students who did not have sufficient prior

knowledge of a given subject and that they often discuss individually with students that need additional help.

To sum up, there is convincing evidence about the importance of the teaching mission at Singidunum University. The university has adopted several important student-centred policies with regard to teaching. These include the freedom enjoyed by faculty to suggest and review their own courses, the informal mentoring system available for both junior faculty and students, the emphasis on the active participation of students in the classroom and the presentation of each course at the beginning of the semester. Equally important, the faculty seems to have a very student-oriented attitude and a drive to accommodate students' requests and suggestions with regard to teaching, whenever possible. The recommendations of the peer assessment team refer mainly to the adoption of a more formalised pedagogical support scheme for both junior and senior faculties. Additionally, the team recommends that the university reflects on the benefits of handing out readers for each course versus the benefit of having the students (or potentially a certain category of students such as the postgraduate ones) search for all or some parts of the reading material.

Conclusions

In terms of teaching and learning practices and policies the team identified the following strengths:

- a dedicated and qualified teaching staff that has the academic freedom to review and suggest courses and that share the same educational philosophy;
- a system of regular evaluation and feedback collection as well as access to professors for immediate feedback on class and assignment performance;
- a system of informal mentoring of new professors;
- a promotion process that recognises and rewards the quality of teaching;
- a strong focus on student centeredness and employability;
- an emphasis on skills building including official certification of various abilities and competencies and the introduction of soft skills trainings;
- strong ties with industry through mandatory internships and other collaborations;
- an openness to students' ideas and suggestions, including the rule of replying to all students' inquiries within 24 hrs.
- distance learning system as well as studying in campus was told to be satisfactory;
- informal mentoring system where each student gets assigned a professor as mentor.

The team recommends the introduction of an institutionalised type of support for learning and upgrading teaching methods that would ensure that all faculty receives appropriate teaching support

Additionally, the team found that the present policies relies extensively on voluntary work of professors to support colleagues and students and suggests that the university could examine some of these practices with a view of formalising these relations and expectations. While the university has tried to attract faculty that has been educated or has worked abroad the degree of faculty and curriculum internationalisation seems to be rather low. This situation has been acknowledged in the interviews and the Internationalisation strategy and at present the declared intentions of the institution is to increase the level of internationalisation. The team supports these intentions and recommends that the university explores available options for faculty and student mobility, joint degrees and the internationalisation of curriculum.

7. Resources

Singidunum is a private university and its main income comes from student fees. The university premises are located in several buildings including a recently opened building. It has large auditoriums, smaller classrooms, laboratories – computer classes. Auditoriums and classrooms are well equipped with all necessary equipment for the teaching process – computer, projector, whiteboard. University representatives claimed they also have separate rooms for student individual and group works, but the evaluation team hasn't visited them and only saw a lounge room for academic staff in the new building. The university has several software platforms such as the home page of the university and the page for descriptions of study courses, additional materials, homework, tests and grading of students. However, during the evaluation, the team discovered that the existing system might be replaced with a more appropriate system for e-learning such as a Moodle system, which is designed for higher education institution's needs.

8. Support services

8.1. Academic support

Academic staff have set separate weekly counselling hours for counselling students on subjects they teach. Nevertheless, students claimed they can reach academic staff for counselling almost whenever it is needed. The university has created an additional separate section on the homepage of their website for working students. On this page, they can access all the necessary materials as well as videos where they can find the content of courses they might have missed. Academic staff have separate counselling hours allocated per week after 5pm to meet the needs of these working students and make counselling also available for them. Also exams are scheduled after 5 PM to accommodate working students. Academic staff offers additional classes and counselling to bridge the gaps of student who don't have the necessary level of knowledge.

Overall, students stated that academic staff in Singidunum University is very responsive, easy to communicate with and helpful. They claimed not to have any problems in communication with teachers.

8.2. Support for students' research

The university often offers students possibilities to attend and participate in conferences related to their study field. Some of the students attended conferences several times, some others didn't. The team sees this as a good practice and suggests to institutionalise the procedure of informing students about these opportunities, benefits and selection criteria. To increase students' involvement in research, it is suggested to create some research hubs for students where they could regularly work on research topics and write research papers under the supervision of academic staff.

8.3. Career counselling

The most common concern expressed among all levels is the strive for employability. The academic staff is also helping students with career counselling and finding internship placements. In order to find very good placements in their field, the university representatives also ask for support from alumni students. To prepare students for internship, the university offers special trainings.

It is recommended that more attention should be paid to international students to help them find appropriate internship placements. In fact, it is more challenging for them because of language barrier, cultural differences and lack of knowledge about the local labour market.

8.4. Social support

The university is relatively new and still working on improving certain aspects related to the social support granted to students. For instance, in the future, the university might consider the need for a permanent psychological counselling and support services for students and academic staff. The team observed that it is common in Singidunum University to assign new responsibilities to academic staff inside the university. Although it can be seen as a good practice, the team would recommend that the responsibilities linked to psychological counselling are assigned to a qualified new hired staff member or outsourced rather than distributed among the existing staff. To meet also the needs of people with visual and physical impairments, the university can allocate or attract resources to improve the environment, buy new equipment and adjust teaching and learning materials.

8.5. Additional trainings

The university offers students opportunities for personal development such as soft-skill courses. Such courses help students to develop their leadership, communication and public speaking skills.

The university offers additional extra-curricular courses and examination to get national and international qualifications that are widely recognised and might be helpful in the future (e.g. Cisco, Microsoft, Guide license).

In order to support students' entrepreneurship, it might be helpful to create an environment for teaching entrepreneurial skills and ensuring an environment for students to practice. Good examples from other institutions are business incubator, separate study course or short project based learning seminar.

Conclusions

The team observed that there is an individualised approach to students and their needs at Singidunum University that works very well and all groups are satisfied with support and atmosphere in university. Taking into account the intention of Singidunum university to expand and attract more students also from abroad, it is important to think about more diverse support services for students that need to be institutionalised and accessible for any student.

9. Student affairs/issues

9.1. Students at Singidunum University

The students at Singidunum University seem to be very motivated to study and acquire any possible competitive advantage stemming from their curricular and extracurricular activities. They are competitive at national level, they get good internship placements and a lot of students get good job offers after finishing their studies. Students who study tourism at Singidunum University are more attractive compared to students with a similar degree from other local universities because of their preparation for responsibilities in work place. Almost all students admitted that they feel the advantage of better professional training when starting an internship or entering the labour market. They evaluated positively the applied approach of teaching in Singidunum University. Tourism students expressed interest of increasing the IT skills training during their studies to improve their preparation even more.

9.2. Internationalisation

The Team are aware of the university's plans to expand at local and international level, nevertheless the team has concerns about the university's ability to maintain a certain quality standards and quality culture if the expansion at local and international level is to happen at the same time. The team wants to stress out that threats can arise along with larger number of international students, who usually demand more administrative work and additional support services.

In order to improve the conditions of existing international students, the university might consider to introduce more permanent study schedule of lectures, seminars and exams for the whole semester. In fact, students have expressed the wish and need to have a week off studies during / in middle of the semester for having possibility to visit home. The opportunity to have a week off can also be a very practical need as there are a lot of important state services that are available only in the home country. Thus, it would be helpful for students to know all the schedules and especially the dates of holidays well in advance, as it impacts their travel expenses and can save important amounts of money for them.

Additional services are very important for international students. Singidunum University could improve, e.g. support for ensuring or finding accommodation, internship placements, organising adaptation, introduction, cross cultural events etc.

In the future, more possibilities should be found for students to participate in international mobility exchange programmes, international internships and different type of projects.

9.3. Student council and representatives

The student council has good connections and collaborations with the university. Nevertheless, it would be good to implement more clear (and in future also more formalised) systems of funding for student self-governing bodies as well as other students' initiatives. The events organised by the student council are well recognised among local students. Students also are aware they can turn to the student council to solve their issues or implement new ideas (e.g. Career Fairs that happened for the first time in Singidunum University).

Conclusions

Students are treated equally in the university and their opinion is taken into account. A more structured funding system and a yearly budget for student self-government body would help both university to plan their budget and increase the independence of the student council which could help them to plan their yearly activities well in advance. More attention can be paid to the needs and expectations of international students and the team advises that they receive more support for integrating into the university life and for accessing student support services.

10. Final conclusions

The decision making structure is clear and fairly inclusive and the community seems to be overall content with the way the university operates and its institutional culture. The team advises that while the student body is well represented and visible, the autonomy of students' life is curtailed by the lack of set budget.

The declared university's mission as described in its official documents combines excellent teaching and transfer of knowledge to its students, research and services to the community. The peer-assessment team has found evidence that the academic community embraces the student-centred approach and is dedicated to providing a suitable learning environment for students and securing their employability.

In terms of teaching and learning practices and policies, the team identified the following strengths:

- a dedicated and qualified teaching staff that has the academic freedom to review and suggest courses and that share the same educational philosophy;
- a system of regular evaluation and feedback collection as well as access to professors for immediate feedback on class and assignment performance;
- a system of informal mentoring of new professors;
- a promotion process that recognises and rewards the quality of teaching;
- a strong focus on student centeredness and employability;
- an emphasis on skills building including official certification of various abilities and competencies and the introduction of soft skills trainings;
- strong ties with industry through mandatory internships and other collaborations;
- an openness to students' ideas and suggestions, including the rule of replying to all students' inquiries within 24 hrs;
- distance learning system as well as studying in campus was told to be satisfactory;
- informal mentoring system where each student gets assigned a professor as a mentor.

The team recommends the introduction of an institutionalised type of support for learning and upgrading teaching methods that would ensure that all faculties receives appropriate teaching support.

Additionally, the team found that the present policies relies extensively on voluntary work of professors to support colleagues and students and suggests that the university could examine some of these practices with a view of formalising these relations and expectations. While the university has tried to attract academic staff that has been educated or has worked abroad, the degree of faculty and curriculum internationalisation seems to be rather low. This situation has been acknowledged in the interviews and the Internationalization strategy and at present the declared intentions of the institution is to increase the level of

internationalisation. The team supports these intentions and recommends that the university explores available options for faculty and student mobility, joint degrees and the internationalisation of curriculum.

The team observed that there is an individualised approach to students and their needs at Singidunum University that works very well and all groups are satisfied with support and atmosphere in university. Taking into account the intention of Singidunum university to expand and attract more students also from abroad, it is important to think about more diverse support services for students that need to be institutionalized and accessible for any student.

Students are treated equally in the university and their opinion is taken into account. A more structured funding system and a yearly budget for student self-government body would help both university to plan their budget and increase the independence of the students' council which could help them to plan their yearly activities well in advance. More attention can be paid to international students to collect their opinions and adjust to their needs.

The team would like to thank the university once more for its interest in and commitment to student-centred learning, and wishes the university all the best in its endeavour.

^[1] ('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