

Rijeka University Report, Second Site Visit

The site visit took place on Oct.29, 2012 from 9 – 15:00

Experts:

Prof. Dr. Luc Francois, University Gent, Belgium

Prof. Dr. Werner Schaal. Marburg University, Germany

Members of Rijeka University:

Rector Prof. Dr. Pero Lucin

Prof. Dr. Zdravko Lenac, Director for EU-Projects and Innovation

Prof. Dr. Snjezana Prijic-Samarzija, Vice-Rector for Teaching and Student Affairs

Prof. Dr. Pavao Komadina, Vice-Rector for Community and Business, Collaboration and Student Employability

Prof.Dr. Nevenka Ozanic, Vice-Rector for Research and Development

Darko Stefan, Head of International Relations Office

Masa Sasinka, International Relations Office

The visit at the University of Rijeka was very well organized and all the people we met were aware of our visit, of the objectives of the project and of the state of affairs. They all spoke in a very open and constructive way about the progress they made in the recent years and about the problems they face and that they try to solve.

Rector's report

- 1) The Rector gave an overview and report about what has happened since the last site visit on March 15, 2010.
 - a) The campus the plans about which were announced in March 2010 is completed. There are buildings for the Faculties of Humanities, Philosophy and Civil Engineering and for the four Departments of Natural Sciences. Moreover, there exists a very modern and efficiently working Student Restaurant. (The experts were shown these buildings in the afternoon.)
 - b) Science Park I is also completely operative and fully functioning. There are about 250 people working in this Science Park. They are hired by the Director of this institution, whereas the Director is appointed by the Rector. The institution is financially

independent meaning that it is responsible for its budget. The money is coming from projects with industry and economy. No basic research is done in the Science Park. Right now the university plans a Science Park II.

- c) In preparation is a building for student dormitories, the first stage of which would have about 650 beds for students. The final capacity should run about 2.500 beds. In this context the Rector mentions a new building for the university hospital and for families of guest professors (about 50 units). Moreover, buildings for social facilities are planned.
- d) The university and the Rector try to improve research in all natural sciences. So everything is done for obtaining good and excellent equipment for these faculties and departments.

- 2) One of the big problems of Croatian universities and especially of the University of Rijeka is "integration". There has been no legal progress since 2010, but it is impressive and surprising what the university was able to achieve via what they call "functional integration". The Rector mentions that the faculties and departments on the new campus are nearly integrated. There exist first parts of a central information system for the entire university, a center for computation, rudiments of a data center, and, last but not least, the international office. The university was able to introduce smart cards for all kinds of services. It is worth mentioning that about 230 people are working in the central administration.
- 3) The budget is given as a lump sum to the university and it is allocated to the legal entities. Rector and Academic Senate are formally autonomous in the allocation of the government budget.

Vice-Rector Prof. Dr. Prijic-Samarzija

This Vice-Rector, a fluently English speaking professor for philosophy, is responsible for all academic study programs and for the implementation of the Bologna process. Similarly as in other countries there exists a critical discussion about the Bologna instruments and an improvement of them. In this context it is interesting to learn that the university did some research in the years 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2010 about the acceptance of the Bologna reform by the students and found out that the acceptance

increased essentially in 2010. Nevertheless, about 80% of the students go on to master studies after having completed the first cycle because employers obviously are hesitant to employ students having a BA only. A remarkable percentage of the students completes the first cycle in three years. But then there is a tendency to prolong the second cycle. It should be mentioned here that the unemployment rate in Croatia amounts to about 20 -25%.

The Vice-Rector reports that the university has created an expert body with 22 members which studies and in some sense evaluates curricula and study programs. This body can also be considered as a positive result of the before mentioned "functional integration". Quality of the study program is measured regularly by internal and partly external advisors. ("Partly external" means that these advisors are coming from the government, not from the university and also not from private institutions.)

Asked about the process of hiring new professors and academic staff it turns out that there is still a tendency to prefer graduates from the own university – probably a system which should be changed in the not too far future. Unfortunately, due to the present financial crisis, the university momentarily is not able to hire new professors at all.

Finally the Vice-Rector reports that LLL is an essential project of the university applying to academic as well as to administrative staff.

Vice-Rector for Community and Business Sector Collaboration and Student Employability

Starting from the idea that good relationship with the external partners is essential for a modern university, the University of Rijeka appointed a Vice-Rector, responsible for these external relations. His experience is mainly in the field of maritime studies and as former Deputy Minister he has a well elaborated network in society.

The University of Rijeka wants to use these contacts in order to help their graduates at an acceptable job at the end of their studies. Due to the economic crisis, this is a difficult task. Another idea is to involve external bodies in some aspects of academic life. The University hopes to have with this initiative a better idea about the real needs of society and about the expectations of employers and other stakeholders. In order to enhance skills of entrepreneurship of students, the university supports small scale initiatives to create companies, totally run by students. These initiatives

are too recent for having now already an idea about the sustainability when student generations succeed one to another.

The idea of putting 'employability' and 'relations with the outside world' so high on the agenda of the university is certainly a very good one and is very much appreciated. It would nevertheless be good to develop in the near future a kind of master plan for these topics. Such a plan can avoid that separate activities have only a short time of existence and – when broadly supported by the central and the faculty levels – would draw the full attention which they certainly need to have. So far, we think that the actions are now limited to several, but very different initiatives all in a standalone position.

Vice-Rector for Research and Development

The University of Rijeka is increasing the efforts in the field of research. Money for research projects comes mainly from outside (ministry, research council, Europe, ...) and has to be gained on a competitive basis. At the central level information about the (successful and other) applications is gathered post factum. This gives the possibility to report to the Academic Senate to what extent the indicators of the strategic plan are reached or not. Information about these realizations are published in the 'e-library' of the university. For the Academic Senate, this information is essential: up to three meetings of the Academic Senate are spent at the discussion over these indicators. The Academic Senate gives important advice to faculties on points of special attention.

It would be good, of course, if the policy makers of the university would be informed in a better way and on a more regular basis about the progress in the field of research.

The University of Rijeka (18.000 students) has approximately 150 PhD-students. The main aspect of their task is doing research. They are also encouraged to follow specialized courses. These programs are now internally and externally evaluated and the results will be available in the coming months. Maybe one of the outcomes of these evaluations will be the creation of doctoral schools (to start with in the field of engineering and hard sciences).

The position of this group is rather difficult. Besides their main task of doing research in their field of expertise, they all have also a teaching duty, that can be time consuming. It is not for sure that these PhD-students will keep afterwards a position as postdoc or in a secured

position as professor. This means that the fragile situation of professors with a heavy teaching load and of PhD-students with too many tasks outside their research could continue. This situation is also influenced by the lack of job possibilities (inside and outside the university) once these group obtained the doctoral degree. A danger of this situation could be a too long stay as PhD-student at the university or the danger of brain drain. The University of Rijeka tries to counter this problem by the development of an innovation strategy, which will be submitted to the Academic Senate in the near future. Closer cooperation with the outside world (technology transfer, PhD's in collaboration with industry, spin off initiatives, ...) will be the key points.

It is obvious that the organization of teaching and the policy on research go hand in hand here and would be in a better condition with more money. But a lot of steps in the university policy can be realized without extra money. Pooling course units – without questioning the ownership by the faculties of these units – can reduce to a certain extent the teaching load of the staff. The same exercise can be done in the framework of the doctoral schools. It would be good not to postpone the creation of these doctoral schools: the profits for the PhD-students and for the institution as a whole would be visible on a short term.

International Relations Office

The internationalization strategy of the University of Rijeka is an essential part of the strategy of the whole university. The plan (for the period 2007-2013) is published at the website. A new plan (2014-2020) is now being prepared. The team at the International Relations Office is small, but very professional and highly motivated. The staff members have a good relationship with the faculties (responsible for the academic aspects of internationalization), with the National Agency and with their colleagues at the other Croatian universities.

Like other Croatian Higher Education Institutions, the University of Rijeka participates in the Erasmus Programme: since 2009 they can receive incoming students and since 2011 they can send out students to institutions inside the European Union. Once Croatia will be member of the EU, the institutions will have more possibilities to send and to receive students. The progress the university made recently is very remarkable. This academic year, the university receives about 60 incoming students and sends out about 110 students. These exchanges take mainly place in some faculties, while others are more or less absent in this field.

The university pays a lot of attention to the quality of the exchanges. It takes care of the incoming students by organizing events, by helping them in the administrative procedures (visa!), in their search for accommodation, by appointing buddies and by organizing language tandems. The university also collaborates with ESN. The university offers the possibility of teaching in English from the moment on that at least five students apply for it. In these cases (limited so far in practice) the course is given in English and in Croatian. In case the professor faces difficulties of teaching in English, he or she can be assisted by staff of his or her department. In the faculty of Economics, a programme is now taught completely in English. For incoming students an 'International Student Guide' has been produced. This guide not only contains general information, but also all faculties are presented in it.

Croatian students, returning from a stay abroad, receive full academic recognition, on condition – of course – that the results of the assessments abroad were positive and on condition that students did what was mentioned in the learning agreement. In some case, when students missed obligatory courses while being abroad, they have to do some extra examinations upon return (organized in a flexible manner). This brings their global workload on more than 60 credits for a full academic year.

The progress made recently is – as said before – very remarkable. Nevertheless, there are still some difficulties and some points of attention.

The huge difficulty to obtain a permission to stay for a whole year is also here a continuing problem. This has to be solved on a national and even international level. Ministers of Education have to be informed again and again about this problem and have to put pressure on their colleagues of Foreign Affairs.

The shortage of accommodation, exploited by the university, is not only bad for Croatian students. It is obvious that incoming students even face more difficulties in order to find a decent accommodation. The assistance of the International Relations Office has to be praised but is of course not a structural solution.

Attention has to be paid on faculties that are not (or not yet) active in the field of internationalization. Several studies showed already the advantages of a well-organized stay abroad of high quality. The appointment in each faculty of at least one contact person for internationalization could help already a lot.

Asking a workload of more than 60 credits for an academic year (although mentioned on the diploma supplement) can be a negative motivation for

some students as it can have a negative influence on their results. By restructuring the programme (f. e. introduction to mobility windows) in general or by a more flexible approach for these students (this is not: easier!), this situation can certainly be solved.

Final remarks by the experts

The University of Rijeka has made already a lot of progress in what is called 'functional integration'. This process has to be encouraged: it is obvious that a not integrated university will not be able to cope with all the challenges of the coming years and decades. It is a wise and on the same time realistic decision of the policy of the university not to force this evolution and to make progress step by step. On the other hand, the continuing decentralized and not integrated approach in some vital fields of university life means a big loss of money and staff time which could be used in a better way of improving teaching and research.

Becoming a member of the EU would be an excellent step for Croatia and Croatian Higher Education. Some regulations, accepted inside the EU, could then be better implemented in Croatia, although resistance and a mental attitude against integration will continue to exist of course. Communication and developing arguments in favour of integration will remain important.

The experts are very impressed by what has been achieved during the last two years since their first site visit. So they believe in the predictions and visions of the Rector. There is a high probability that they will become reality. We wish Rijeka University all the best for its future.

Luc Francois

Werner Schaal