

**European University Association – EUA
Institutional Evaluation Programme**

**Vysoká Škola Manažmentu - VSM
Bratislava and Trenčín
Slovak Republic**

EUA Evaluation Report

**John Kelly
Sérgio Machado dos Santos
Jacqueline Smith**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme	3
The Participation of the Vysoká Škola Manažmentu-VSM	3
The working method and team	3
Acknowledgements	4
The context	4
Constraints and institutional norms	5
Legal constraints	5
Structural/contextual constraints	6
Financial constraints	7
Achievements – Strengths	7
Teaching	7
Research	10
Resources	10
Management – Governance	11
Special Focus: E-Learning	12
The Capacity for Change	14
Vision	15
Quality Assessment – Quality Assurance	15
Bologna Process	15
Research	16
Student services	16
Internationalisation	17
Funding	17
Image	18
Conclusions	18

Introduction

The EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme

EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme is a service provided to universities wishing to assess their strengths and weaknesses in terms of strategic policy and academic quality management. Offering an external diagnosis by an international team of experts, the evaluation focuses on the institution as a whole, taking into consideration its mission, goals and needs, as well as the particular contextual factors relevant in the local environment.

This dynamic peer-evaluation method aims to help the institution examine its own goals - both short and long-term - to understand how internal and external factors affect and constrain its development, and to provide specific tools and recommendations to support institutional development. It does not offer a blueprint for development, nor does it evaluate the quality of teaching and research *per se*; it does however consider *management* of teaching, learning, and research as fundamental aspects of an institution's quality. The review process is consultative and supportive and aims to develop quality as a central value guiding an institution's strategic development and management, thus enhancing both its autonomy and accountability.

The Participation of the Vysoká Škola Manažmentu-VSM

In 2005, the Government of Slovakia invited EUA to undertake the evaluation of all public institutions of higher education in the country. The intention of this evaluation is to support Slovak higher education institutions in their continuing development in order to meet best international academic standards and practices that are adapted to their specific context. The Government also invited private universities and third level institutions to join in the exercise and VSM took this opportunity, opting for a special focus on e-learning. VSM is the only private institution included among the 23 taking part in this process.

The working method and team

The review team (thereafter Team) appointed by EUA for evaluating VSM was comprised of:

- *John Kelly*, former Registrar, National University of Ireland, Dublin– Chair of the team
- *Sergio Machado de Santos*, former Rector, University of Minho, Portugal
- *Jacqueline Smith*, former Deputy Head, OECD/IMHE Programme - secretary of the team

The evaluation process involved four stages:

- VSM formed a self evaluation committee with deans, teachers, top managers who prepared the self evaluation report (thereafter SER).
- After studying the SER, the Team made a first visit on 21-22 February 2007, met a number of stakeholders – top management, teachers, students, graduates, and representatives of the business community. Following this visit the Team requested additional information which was sent to them in ample time.

- The Team made a second visit on 15-17 May to explore and refine their understanding of VSM further. On this occasion the Team met with more stakeholders, including one from the Ministry of Education.
- The Team prepared the evaluation report.

Most of the points developed in this report were the substance of the oral presentation during the last session of the second visit. This was an open discussion meeting which was attended by top management, academic and administrative staff and students.

In this written report a number of issues are identified which are addressed in turn and which look at constraints, strengths, potential for improvement, that impact on the operation and the quality of education provided by the institution: teaching, research, quality assurance, resources, management, and the special focus on e-learning and lifelong learning. The capacity for change in these and other areas is explored, recommendations are made and the report is concluded with a summary of these recommendations.

The Team wishes to record its praise for the thorough, detailed, well documented SER, and for the openness which prevailed in all its meetings at VSM. During the two visits the team was impressed by what VSM has already accomplished in the short time of its existence.

Acknowledgements

The Team wishes to express its gratitude to the University and especially to its Rector, Professor Branislav Lichardus, and its Director and Chairman of the Board Dr. Jan Rebro, but also to the many staff, students, graduates, members of the business community and the Ministry of Education whom it met during the visits for sharing their views on the status and development of this institution. The complexity of the functioning of such an institution cannot be fully understood in two short visits, but the team hopes nevertheless that it has captured something of the reality of higher education in Slovakia as well as the spirit and ethos propelling VSM. In particular, the team wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Professor Jozef Hvorecky who acted as the perfect liaison person in successfully organising both visits, and responding to the team's sometimes demanding requests.

The context

The evaluation takes place in the context of the second phase of development of higher education in the Slovak Republic post 1989. The first phase in the 1990s saw an expansion of the system with a rapid increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education. The second phase focuses on quality assurance and meeting the Bologna process standards.

Slovakia has undergone major political and economic changes after the Velvet revolution in 1989 and the subsequent split of the former Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in the two independent Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. "The revolutionary political-societal and socio-economic changes, which took place in this country after November 1989, have logically resulted in fundamental legal, educational, organisational and, particularly, ideological and pedagogical changes in the field of education and training and in its management" (*Educational System in Slovak Republic*, Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, 2005). The most recent Act of 2002, as amended in 2003, sets up in a comprehensive way the mission, status and activities of higher education institutions, their

organisation and funding management. It recognises public, state and private Higher education institutions (HEIs), at three different levels:

- full university which provides bachelor's, master's and PhD education and conducts high level research;
- full higher education institution which provides full bachelor's and master's education and conducts some research; and
- college which provides bachelor's education.

The foundation of the Management College of Trenčín, also known as Vysoká Škola Manažmentu or VSM as it is referred to throughout this Report, was the result of an initiative by the US City University of Seattle (at the time City University of Bellevue) in 1991. VSM later became accredited as the first non-profit private institution of higher education in the Slovak Republic and came officially into autonomous existence in 1999 by an Act of Parliament. Although independent of City University of Seattle (CU), it nevertheless retains strong ties with its parent institution, subscribing to its ethos, benefiting from its services, and becoming a partner, and now influencing it in return.

VSM is located in two sites: Trenčín and Bratislava, both accredited within the Slovak higher education system.

Originally teaching took place in English only. As of 2004 several degree programmes are offered in Slovak language as well. In addition, an Intensive English Programme aims to raise proficiency so that students can easily follow their study courses in English.

Constraints and institutional norms

Legal constraints

In the post 1989 period, several Acts have modified the legislation on higher education in the Slovak Republic. While these changes reflect the intention of the successive Slovak governments to increase the quality of the country's higher education system, make it more efficient in meeting increasing demand and bring it in line with other European countries as part of the Bologna process, nevertheless they also introduce an element of uncertainty that renders long term planning difficult. This is the case in particular for the accreditation process. The Act of 2002, amended in 2003, requires that new programmes be initially accredited only for the standard duration of that programme; the institution must then reapply for a new accreditation, which then may be granted for a longer period. In the case of VSM, the knowledge management programme offered at master's level covers a two year span. Accreditation was thus granted for an initial period of two years. For the programme to be offered again beyond this initial cycle it must be reaccredited. However the accreditation process lasts several months, which means it must be initiated well before the first cycle is completed. This does not allow for a meaningful evaluation of that programme to be conducted, nor for necessary modifications to be defined.

Other legal requirements severely restrict the range of possibilities for a private institution to launch new programmes and hire the required teaching staff. A "garantor" is assigned to each

programme to guarantee its legitimacy and quality. The guarantor must be a full professor from an accredited institution, is allowed to act as guarantor for only one programme and must be less than 65 years old. The conditions imposed on a guarantor severely limit the number of potential guarantors and may prevent the opening of new programmes in a small private institution trying to enlarge its offer of education and adapt it to the demand.

Another legal requirement certainly meant to protect the students may actually have an opposite effect: instructors are required to hold a teaching academic degree. Therefore, professionals from the business world, no matter how qualified and experienced, can only act as guest lecturers or instructors – lower rank faculty members - in a HEI, thus lowering the formal qualification structure of that institution. As a result institutions are reluctant to invite such professionals as they (the institutions) may then not meet the criteria set up by the Accreditation Commission, in particular regarding the proportion of docents and professors among their staff. This means that it is extremely difficult for an institution to incorporate the lessons from practical experience with formal academic teaching and to “strengthen dialogue with employers and other external stakeholders”, that the *Bologna Trends V Report*¹ identifies as a challenge for the future. This requirement will similarly affect all HEIs, whether public or private; it would thus warrant careful rethinking on the part of the authorities.

Lastly, a worrying possibility looms in the future. As they are expressed in a draft law being proposed, the conditions for an institution to be classified at level 2 would conflict with the need to develop lifelong learning: it is proposed that distance learners, therefore e-learners, be considered part time students, and that for an institution to be classified at level 2 the number of part time students enrolled in degree programmes not exceed the number of full time students. One of VSM strengths is indeed its e-learning programme, which is of high quality and meets the needs of distant or working students. If the law is passed, retaining the level 2 rating and aiming to attain level 3 at some point in the future while expanding the e-learning offer, or the number of students enrolled, equates trying to square the circle.

Reflecting on the various constraints with which VSM has to contend, the Team believes that some of the legal requirements may be unnecessarily detailed or could even become counter productive. The Team fully appreciates that the authorities have to ensure the academic quality of the education provided, but fails to see why they should specify the range of internal operations in a private institution. Consequently, the Team respectfully suggests that the Government may gain by revising its position regarding some of the legal requirements, or their range of application. The particular points mentioned in this report concern the qualifications required of guarantors and of lecturers, the status of e-learning students, size of senate. Adjustment of these requirements would not only benefit private higher education in Slovakia, it would contribute to the development of a more efficient over all higher education system in the country.²

¹ The *Trends V Report* evaluates the progress made in implementing recommendations of the Bologna process since the Bergen meeting of higher education Ministers in 2005 and identifies issues for the next two years, in preparation of the London meeting of Ministers, on 17-18 May 2007. The report can be found at: [www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/Final Trends Report May 10.pdf](http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/Final_Trends_Report_May_10.pdf)

² The team does not want foreclose any findings of the system report but nevertheless it considers these observations relevant in the context of the reviewed institution.

Structural/contextual constraints

Ideally each academic teaching at VSM ought to be perfectly bilingual, well-versed in student centered learning and meeting the Slovak requirements for teaching in higher education. Individuals meeting all these conditions are hard to find. In addition, foreign teachers usually command higher salaries than can be offered to them in Slovakia.

The student-centered teaching combining practical case studies with formal academic learning requires teaching material, text books, software, some of which are not yet available in the Slovak language. Consequently the VSM has to use material which is not fully relevant and, at the same time, develop its own material, a remarkable but slow process, in both cases with impact on the quality of education offered in Slovak language.

Competition represents another constraint, or rather, challenge. The challenge comes from state and public universities charging lower tuition fees, and from the number of private institutions, nine besides the VSM, which came into existence in this last decade, attracting the same student population.

Financial constraints

As a private institution VSM relies heavily on tuition fees: in 2006 more than 96% of its income came from tuition.

Very few other possible sources of income appear to exist. Through the SER and meetings, it was explained that a current tax scheme gives corporations the option to allocate 2% of their corporate tax to the arts, health services or education. However, the Government has recently decided to cancel this option for education, thus eliminating an incentive to contribute to the funding of private institutions, and thereby depleting their incomes.

Students may apply for scholarships from – limited - public funds according to two different schemes. Applying a complicated formula, the *merit scholarship* is granted to the top 10% of in-class students with the best Grade Point Average (GPA), that is, to students in their second or third year; the administration of this type of scholarship seems complex. The *need scholarship* is easier to determine and to manage. At VSM 72 students were awarded a merit scholarship and 28 received a need scholarship in 2006-2007 academic year, and 64 students and 6 students in the previous academic year. In addition, there are a few *private scholarships* donated by various institutions and individuals, averaging 15 students each year.

Achievements - Strengths

The mission of this Team, as specified by EUA, is to look closely at the quality of the education and thus of the standards of the degree that is awarded, and the Team's interpretation of that responsibility is to look at all the structures and procedures which it believes, in varying degrees, impinge on the final academic quality of the degrees.

Teaching

- The *Bologna Declaration* and its many recommendations is now the accepted blueprint for higher education in Europe. At VSM the degree structure leads to both Bachelors' and Masters', each ensuring entry into the labour market or access to higher levels of studies; the credit system meets the European Credit Transfer System

(ECTS) standards and VSM has applied for the ECTS label; the students enrolled in the City University programmes have received their academic transcripts from the very beginning of these programmes and procedures to provide the specific diploma supplement are now in the works. As of June 2007, the diploma supplement will be issued to graduates from the knowledge management programme (masters' level). The Team is pleased to note that VSM is fully compliant with the Bologna Process.

- It is noted that the *curriculum* has the appropriate mix of practical case study and academic content providing both a good education and preparedness for the Slovak job market. It is noted, from the meetings with graduates as well as with a number of representatives of the Slovak business world, that the graduates of VSM are highly regarded and have no difficulty in getting employment after graduation. This meets one of the recommendations in the Bologna process regarding employability, “a concern that higher education should be more responsive to the needs of changing society and labour market” (*Trends V Report*, EUA, 2007, website accessed 28 May 2007)
- The emphasis on having a *student-centred approach*, “a system adapted to respond to a growing variety of student needs”, again one of the goals of the Bologna reforms is noted with approval.

In VSM the classes are small with no more than 30 students per class, and generally with fewer in most classes. Many of the HEIs across Europe would be pleased to have VSM's 14:1 students/teacher ratio, which is a key factor in the generation of excellent staff-student rapport and the active participation by the students in class debates and discussions. Student participation in class is not only encouraged, but required, as one of the teaching approaches used in the institution. Initially, most Slovak students who are more familiar with the traditional lectures approach are hesitant in such class discussions; however their assignments include preparing and making oral presentations, debating in class, and grading takes account of the quality of their participation in all these activities so that gradually students become active and enthusiastic participants. Representatives from the business world confirmed that, compared to other recruits, VSM graduates are at ease in the work environment, and are not afraid to be pro-active.

An original approach taken from City University Seattle, the Scholastic Honesty Programme (SHP) ensures that students benefit from their own work. Several sources suggested that cheating and plagiarism are endemic in Slovakia and are not considered reprehensible, if one can get away with it. The SHP follows a rigorous systematic procedure, whereby each essay is submitted to the Turnitin computer software programme to identify sections which may have been plagiarised. Several steps and appeals procedures are in place to evaluate the degree of seriousness, to maintain fairness and to give opportunities to correct the situation, but could ultimately lead to the student being excluded. The Team was informed that this ultimate step was taken on three occasions. Tests and examinations are organised in such way as to prevent cheating. It seems that students are surprised at first by all these measures, but they gradually get used to them. The data provided in the SER and explained later, show a decrease in occurrences of breach of scholastic honesty during each term. However, according to a staff member, in some cases it is difficult to determine whether there is a real breach of honesty or an “honest mistake”. It was noted that the SHP was sometimes perceived by the students only in its threatening aspects, which would

suggest that more communication and discussions on this would assist the development of a better appreciation of the SHP system. In spite of the latter two comments, the SHP seems to be well accepted by both students and the staff. In the words of one student “the scholastic honesty programme forces you to be creative”.

All these factors lead to a friendly learning environment. The team met a number of students, including several non-Slovaks, who all were articulate, expressed their opinions, criticism, and praise, freely and clearly and were generally impressive. They were pleased to be students of VSM, and believed it to be the best business school in Slovakia.

- *Diversity*: It was noted with approval that the VSM operates in the two languages of English and Slovak as well as having major teaching programmes in intensive English. This is not without problems, as noted above. The student-centred learning approach is not common in Slovakia so that the appropriate teaching material is not always readily available. Accordingly, it is being developed by some of the staff in the VSM, and this takes a long time. The lack of material in Slovak language may account for some of the criticism voiced by students who feel that text book material is sometimes outdated. Staff at VSM are fully aware of this constraint and are working on improving the quality of the education provided in Slovak language so as to bring it up to the level of that provided in English. Proficiency in English gives VSM graduates a competitive advantage on the job market. Furthermore, English language teaching makes it easier for non-Slovak students to study in VSM, thereby giving an additional advantage which should come in full play when VSM participates in the ERASMUS exchange programme.

Furthermore the procedure whereby students may enrol at the beginning of each of the trimesters is indeed excellent for the students but must present substantial difficulties for class scheduling and student examinations.

The team is indeed impressed that, with these challenging logistics, this institution is clearly operating smoothly and efficiently.

- *Quality*. The EUA evaluation programme is concerned with strategies for change and mechanisms for quality assurance and quality management. As regards teaching, the Team was impressed that VSM has put in place a number of mechanisms intended to assure, monitor and enhance the academic quality of its degree programmes. These involve:
 - initial and regular training sessions on student centred teaching or specific issues for all academic staff;
 - regular department meetings for curriculum design, teaching syllabi that must be submitted to department heads;
 - class observation by department heads – often unannounced;
 - the development of sets of criteria for teaching and for grading.

As noted in the *Trends V* report

it is also an aspect of democratic society that those who are the users of services

should provide feedback on their quality and have a stake in their development. This is particularly the case when the shift in educational paradigm is from teacher to student centred learning.

At VSM, students are regularly involved in monitoring quality of teaching. Accordingly students are encouraged to communicate freely with instructors and management, and invited to fill in a teaching evaluation questionnaire at the end of each term; the department head then discusses the summarised results of these evaluations with the instructor. Although the students we met voiced some scepticism of the effectiveness of their involvement in the evaluation of their lecturers and courses, they recognised that they may not have the opportunity to see the impact of their evaluation of a course after they complete it. In addition, in a process of ongoing improvement, a new salary scale which takes course evaluation into account is being put in place. This new scale will provide financial incentive for excellent teaching.

- Finally, under the heading of teaching, the team was impressed by the *e-learning* programme. This is, indeed, a highly innovative teaching activity, a very courageous and apparently successful venture into the latest educational technologies which any university in the EU would be proud to have on its teaching agenda. As the selected special focus e-learning is further analysed below.

Research

Research capacity at VSM is still limited but growing. VSM was established as a teaching-only institution by City University (of Seattle). It had to convince its parent institution that research was an essential part of its mission in the Slovak and European contexts. In addition, there are obstacles of image and acceptance within the Slovak Republic. Nevertheless, it is noted that the research dimension is well integrated in VSM's operation and is one of its priorities for future development. In the few years since its establishment, VSM has produced a number of refereed articles and research publications, all listed in an annex to the SER, and has conducted several research projects in association with other European universities. It was noted that VSM, in its research strategy, has placed some emphasis on concentrating on issues of particular relevance to contemporary Slovakia, such as knowledge management, that it has already organised two workshops on this topic since 2006 and is setting up an international summer school on the same topic for students and young university lecturers from four countries.

Resources

As a private non-profit institution, VSM relies heavily on tuition fees. It is gratifying to learn that in spite of financial constraints listed above, the institution is healthy, if tight, in its finances. In addition to income from tuition fees, the institution was able to attract some funding from several donors in the US, some grants from the EU, and in 2005 a subsidy from the Slovak public purse to the amount of SKK 2 164 000 (approximately EUR 60 000). It appears that the latter is no longer possible.

The Team notes with approval that, from its own funds, VSM is able to provide up to 30 partial or full scholarships annually to a number of deserving students from low income families. It is the hope of the Team that the financial situation will allow the institution to continue offering and to expand this type of scholarships.

The Team noted the substantial percentage of international faculty in VSM which is commendable and all the more remarkable considering the difficulty in attracting international academics who are well qualified in their field, bilingual in English and Slovak, and in a position to accept the relatively lower salaries that VSM can offer in comparison to what can usually be offered to expatriates. Is a compensatory reward the fact that they can contribute to the development of a dynamic innovative institution? All the staff members the team met, whether in teaching or in administration, appeared very committed to contribute to the successful future of VSM.

The Library is small but effective and has online access to the CU (City University) library in the USA. The various course materials appeared satisfactory and were commented on favourably by the students. Likewise the ICT equipment and computer facilities were generally small but seemed quite adequate. VSM provides wifi internet access, an essential service as more and more students have their own computers.

VSM owns its premises, in both Trenčín and Bratislava. In Bratislava, part of the building is rented out due to current and hopefully temporary financial pressures. It is noted that there are plans to gradually reclaim the rented space and to explore the possibility of adding buildings to allow for expansion and to provide badly needed facilities for students.

Most of all, of course, the greatest resource and trump card of VSM is the English language. This must leave the door of VSM open to inter-university academic linkages and student and staff mobility right across the world and it is an asset which the team suggests could be used more extensively than it is at present

Management - Governance

The rather complicated organisational chart highlights the complex relations with City University; perhaps it also illustrates how VSM is becoming independent from City University while retaining constructive ties and strengthening convergence between the two institutions. The current governance structure is relatively new, and too recently put in place for its impact to be properly evaluated. However, the top management structure, with both the Rector's and the Scientific Councils, appears to offer the right type of academic and administrative governing structure and balance of influences. It is suggested, however, that the organisational chart could be redrawn to better reflect in a simpler format the central priority of the academic activities of VSM.

The new department structure recently put in place seems to offer more opportunities for comprehensive instruction and input from staff and students. However it is understood that it is not fully operational yet, and it is too early to evaluate how well it is working. It is important that VSM monitor this development carefully.

A new Slovak legislation will impose on all HEIs a governance structure with an academic senate composed of 15 members at least, one third of them being students. The Team appreciates that there is some concern at VSM that a 15-member senate is too large for a small institution, and also that the high number of students – even though the percentage would be lower than in the current 5 member senate - might hinder, or even block, the decision power of the Senate. Although it believes that VSM could make adjustments to meet this new requirement, the Team shares the view that 15 is indeed a high number for a small institution. In addition, whilst the Team fully appreciates that the Government must protect

the public by ensuring the quality of the degrees offered by its universities, it does not understand why it should specify the details of the management structures in HEIs.

Throughout VSM a friendly ethos prevails, in which there is mutual confidence and trust among staff, students and outside personnel including graduates and business persons. The team noted in particular the capacity of VSM management and academic staff to adapt without too much upheaval to the very many challenges, political, financial and academic in the eight years since it was inaugurated. It had to evolve from an extension of City University to becoming a partner, with its own vision, mission, set of local constraints in a environment in rapid transition. Furthermore it had to contend with a negative image of private higher education in the country, with competition from other private institutions, as well as an unfavourable legal framework. The lack of appropriate academic coursework material in Slovak language, essential for international business education studies, had to be overcome by creating its own. It has not been an easy ride and the current healthy and friendly ambience is a great credit to the top management and academic staff of this institution.

Special focus: e-learning

As European Commissioner Jan Figel stated “Globalisation, new technologies and demographic developments constitute an enormous challenge; one of the answers to this problem is the access to lifelong learning” (Jan Figel, 2006, European Commission webpage on e-learning).

The *London Communiqué* issued on 18 May 2007 at the meeting of Ministers of Higher Education participating in the Bologna Process notes that “a more systematic development of flexible learning paths to support lifelong learning is at an early stage” and asks to “increase the sharing of good practice and to work towards a common understanding of the role of higher education in lifelong learning” (Bologna Secretariat website accessed 30 May 2007: www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/index).

The EU e-Learning Action Plan defined e-learning as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (*E-Learning in Europe – Results and Recommendations – Thematic Monitoring under the Leonardo da Vinci Programme*, 2003, accessed 30 May 2007, <http://bildungplus.forum-bildung.de/files/e-learning.pdf>).

According to OECD “E-learning refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance and/or support learning in tertiary education” (OECD *Policy Brief on E-Learning in Tertiary Education*, 2005).

The Slovak Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education states in its publication on the *Educational System in Slovak Republic* that higher education “study may be realised either in the form of full time or part time study in the present, distant or combined method”.

These various statements highlight the importance placed upon flexible access to higher education and upon lifelong learning, and the role that e-learning can play to support them. E-learning is an increasingly common vehicle for providing lifelong learning. The Team was impressed that VSM is obviously well in line, in fact often well ahead, in the implementation of the Bologna Process recommendations regarding flexible access to HE and lifelong learning.

At VSM e-learning evolved from distance learning, strongly supported by City University. It corresponds to VSM's goal of "making higher education more responsive and accessible by utilizing a variety of technologies and delivery format", and more specifically to Objectives 1 and 2, as expressed in the SER report. It has now become a beacon in Slovakia. However this has not been accomplished without obstacles.

Specific constraints for e-learning are structural and political.

From a structural standpoint, the platform (Billboard) currently in use at VSM does not allow the variety and flexibility of use that the student-centred teaching methodology requires. In addition, the same lack of teaching and learning material in Slovak language as noted above is compounded by the fact that the tools themselves, the software, are usually available in English only, and that some teachers are new to this form of teaching and still unsure about its validity or their capacity to deliver. Therefore, it is reassuring to see that as progress in technologies occur very rapidly, VSM is involved in a process of on-going improvement of its operational systems, now moving from the unsatisfactory Billboard platform, to two newer platforms: Blackboard for courses in English and U-Lern for Slovak language courses. VSM is in the process of migrating from Billboard to the new platforms; it is too early to judge how much more effective these are. The staff and top managers of these programmes in VSM are urged to monitor this migration phase carefully and adjust as needed, which we know they will do.

From a political/legal standpoint, it is noted that the authorities consider that distance education, be it e-learning or other, is part-time study of lesser quality than full-time on-site study. Already, two years ago OECD observed that "*for some institutions and in some countries, key barriers remain.scepticism about the pedagogic value of e-learning and staff development are probably the most challenging*" (OECD Policy Brief on E-Learning in Tertiary Education, 2005). Newer, unscrupulous, degree mills type of institutions, of which there is an abundance throughout the world of academe, may account for the negative image. They may also account for the Slovak Government's decision that an institution cannot enrol more than the same number of part-time students as full-time students at levels 2 and 3. While this decision can be understood as a measure to protect the education consumer against bogus education providers, it is regrettable that it bases the criteria only on numbers, and not on quality which could very well be evaluated with requirements to meet clear sets of standards. The high standards and ongoing improvement process evident in VSM could serve as model, or reference, to establish guidelines, or requirements, for quality e-learning in the Slovak Republic.

Among the aspects that the Team considers contribute to the quality of e-learning at VSM are:

- in terms of *human resources*: the selection process, the Memorandum of Understanding which all new teachers must sign, the teacher training sessions, including online training to teaching online, the requirement to monitor the discussion groups regularly, to submit their syllabus for approval;
- in terms of *student learning*: the number of students per online course limited at 15, the same requirement to abide by the Scholastic Honesty Programme as the on-site students, the requirement to take part in the online discussion groups and the correlated grading system which takes account of the degree and quality of participation in such groups, group study projects, the possibility to enrol at different

times during the year, the final exam requiring presence and conducted in different ways – on site, via telephone or webcam – to accommodate various situations.

Graduates interviewed credited VSM e-learning with providing as good a quality of higher education as on-site, in cases when students cannot attend an institution full time. It is understood that VSM is the only institution in the Slovak Republic that offers a full degree course online, and that this degree is as valued as others on the job market.

It is difficult to find weaknesses with the online education at VSM. However the institution is engaged in a continuous improvement process, accordingly it is suggested that it might focus its further improvement efforts in the following directions:

- *quality monitoring*: technology used, course content, assessment of learning outcomes;
- *Marketing*: profiling the institution with its strong e-learning programme, highlighting compliance with the Bologna Process, finding more ways to disseminate information about the programme;
- *widening the offer of courses*: in this respect it is appreciated that VSM currently is completing a project with a grant from ESF designed to develop 10 marketing courses that will be available in both languages; 4 of these courses were to be tested the week after the second site visit;
- *relations with the authorities*: the Ministry of Education has expressed a positive opinion of VSM; the institution should work at maintaining open, constructive relations with the authorities.

To continue along these lines, it is recommended that VSM establish contacts with other institutions offering e-learning, in particular open universities in different countries, associations of HEIs or other such as the Observatory on Borderless Education. There can be no doubt that this online education methodology may influence the teaching in Slovakia and beyond.

Capacity for change

A modern university must be in a continual state of change in all its academic disciplines, especially as regards curricula and subject matter. Equally, the individual professor or lecturer will be academically dead if his/her discipline does not change or develop as research and discovery open up new horizons. Such change for both institution and individual are essential if they are to survive.

In the relatively short time of its existence, VSM has shown a remarkable capacity to expand and adapt to the increasing and evolving education needs in the country. In this section of the report, those issues are presented where it is suggested the institution could focus its efforts for further improvement, the ultimate focus being, of course, to provide a high quality education in Slovakia and, by so doing, to make its contribution to the building of a strong European Higher Education Area.

Vision

The first section of the SER presents VSM's mission statement and lists eight objectives to accomplish this mission; the action plan (last page of the SER) complements the objectives with specific targets. A mission statement serves to guide the institution education community through its future development and in its relations with society at large. In the SER the objectives are thoroughly detailed. It is obvious that several of these are already met, or that they represent directions to follow rather than specific targets to reach. It is believed that the self evaluation process has helped the SER steering committee members understand the mission of the institution better, has clarified their concept of academic quality management and assurance, and has emphasised their role as educators in VSM. It is suggested that the time is now right in the development of this institution to revisit its vision and to prepare a renewed mission statement. To foster a sense of ownership among all members of the VSM community, it is recommended that a team representative of the various stakeholders of academic and administrative staff, students, graduates and business persons be appointed to define the vision of VSM so as to develop a strategic development plan with specific targets to be reached over the next five years. Such a process helps generate a greater loyalty and esprit de corps across the institution and an enthusiasm in achieving the targets that are set.

Quality assessment – Quality assurance

Quality assurance (QA) serves two purposes: within an institution it helps monitor and foster quality, but for this to be successful visibility of results of QA is essential. The current standards and procedures put in place for QA in VSM are excellent and there is no doubt that these are conscientiously and efficiently implemented by those in charge, principally the two associate deans. As regards these academic standards, for the delivery of teaching, it is acknowledged that they provide a good background for the quality and the reliability of the grading of students. However, it is strongly recommended that the QA would be further enhanced by the establishment an office with overall responsibility for QA across all the academic programmes and all management operations of VSM in order to take a holistic approach to QA. The responsible person in this office should become fully familiar with, and involved in, the growing emphasis on QA across the European higher education domain.

As a rider to this recommendation, it is suggested that the QA details are developed by a representative group of academic staff and students so as to ensure that these two involved groups have an ownership of the QA function and thereby will be willing participants in its implementation.

Bologna process

As a European institution VSM is involved in the Bologna process and it is noted that several of its processes are already well underway. VSM is applying for the ECTS label, along with other Slovak institutions, although none has obtained it yet, according to the Slovak National Agency and ECTS representative as reported to the Team. VSM is developing the diploma supplement which is starting to be delivered with master's degrees. As this report is being written, the Team has been informed that VSM has been approved to receive the ERASMUS charter. English as a language of instruction will now give VSM a definite advantage for student mobility. An agreement for collaboration in an ERASMUS Intensive Project between the Oulu University of Technology, Finland, the Vilnius University, Lithuania, the Institute of Finance and Administration of Prague in the Czech Republic and VSM has already been negotiated. Now that VSM has been granted the ERASMUS charter the agreement may

include staff and student mobility. Informal contacts have been initiated with three other institutions in Austria, Ireland and Italy. In the provision of lifelong learning VSM is well along the way, even well ahead of many European institutions. The various steps already taken by VSM to develop its research programmes are noted, as well as the intention of eventually establishing a PhD programme.

Research

Given the very short lifetime to date it cannot be expected the research output to be great, but the Team is impressed with what has been achieved so far and has also noted the upward trend in the research publications output data curve. However, to reach the full research university status this will have to improve substantially and must be associated with the third leg of the Bologna structure, the Ph.D. The institution leaders are strongly encouraged to keep all this in their academic sights; it is appreciated that this is already a high priority in VSM's action plan, that it intends to develop its research capacity and establish a PhD programme in an orderly fashion, setting priorities in terms of structure and topics, securing a sufficient number of qualified docents and garantors (as required by Slovak law) and expects to be ready in 4 to 5 years. It is appreciated that the research function is in place and is identified in the organisational chart, but it is recommended that VSM go further by establishing a separate research office, initially staffed by just one person whose responsibility is to keep the academic staff alerted to the many international opportunities for research funding, principally for the immediate future in the EU – Framework Programme VII, and also to develop an expertise in completing funding application forms as an incentive and assistance to the academic staff. Properly managed this office should more than pay its own way, as has been the experience of most universities across the EU.

Student services

The inadequacy of the student services was a recurrent theme at each meeting with students. It is fully appreciated that it is not easy to improve this situation overnight and it is noted here merely to record this message which was emphasised by the students in both visits.

There are a few extra-mural student activities, such as hockey teams, dances, but these are very limited. The Trenčín site enrolls students from distant locations in Slovakia, and provides dormitory housing for a number of them. Consequently many students reside on the Trenčín campus, thus creating campus life and the opportunity for various student activities, and this was noticeable in the meetings with the students. The Bratislava campus has no housing facilities at this point, so that most students live in the city, often with their families, have their own social circles outside VSM and are not interested in developing campus life. When the institution can extend its premises in Bratislava it plans to add student housing; hopefully this will create opportunities for more student activities. This should help develop a greater spirit in student life and a stronger esprit de corps throughout the institution.

Other facilities – student lounge, study rooms, student cafeteria – are also lacking and it is noted with approval that their provision is part of the expansion plan when VSM reclaims the entire building.

Among other services, the slow enrolment procedure is an ongoing problem and is complicated by the fact that enrolments must also be registered in City University so that the students have access to City University's online facilities. The staff at VSM are aware of this inadequacy and have plans to slowly incorporate the entire enrolment process and student

files management in a centrally computerised system (PeopleSoft) which is already operational for the English language programmes

It was reported that teachers themselves provide student counselling as needed. It was further noted that there is no need for career guidance as such, since students find employment very rapidly after graduation, usually within 3 to 4 weeks, while graduates from other institutions usually have much more trouble. This is a tribute to the quality of education at VSM. However, competition will increase, a trend already happening and felt. While at the moment competition threatens mostly the recruitment of students, eventually it will affect graduates in their search for employment and it would seem advisable that VSM consider setting up a career guidance office at some point in the future.

Internationalisation

As part of the City University network VSM is already active in internationalisation. The large percentage of non-Slovak staff contributes significantly to this dimension. However, it is suggested that the academic programmes of VSM would benefit from greater and wider international involvement, where, no doubt, with appropriate marketing and delivery, it will get a very positive reception.

Accordingly, the first recommendation under this heading is one of encouragement and is to develop and implement in full the ECTS system of credits and to pursue, with enthusiasm and energy, active participation of students in the ERASMUS student exchange programme, as noted above. As already mentioned, the use of English language in VSM degree programmes is an invaluable asset in the future participation in this programme. It is fully appreciated that VSM is involved in the City University mobility programme involving both European and USA universities, and it is anticipated that this programme will be merged with the ERASMUS mobility programme, which would be excellent for both the students and VSM as a whole.

In tandem with participation in the ERASMUS programme it is recommended that VSM adopt a policy of joining a number of European and international HEIs organisations

Finally, in internationalisation, it is recommended that VSM consider adopting a more aggressive strategy for recruiting foreign (high fee paying) students from outside the European Union. It is fully appreciated that there are difficulties in this, such as those that the VSM has already experienced, where foreign students tend to disappear after registration. Unfortunately, many universities in Europe experience this type of difficulty. However, the benefits of having more non-EU students are not only financial but also educational and cultural. Most European campuses have become much more culturally diverse and they are all the more exciting and pleasant as a result. This is one very positive effect from the onset of globalisation to the university world.

Funding

VSM is fortunate to benefit from a healthy, if tight, financial situation. However, the almost total dependency on tuition fees will threaten this financial stability as competition for students increases among private higher education as a result, among other factors, of demographic trends with diminishing age cohorts, the rising number of private HEIs operating in Slovakia, the greater opportunities for students to study in other countries now that the Slovak Republic has joined the European Union.

VSM is of course well aware of the future potential difficulties. The Team notes with appreciation the various actions listed in the action plan not only to find additional sources of funding but also to have an impact on encouraging public authorities to enact legislation and regulation more favourable to private higher education.

Accordingly it would seem important that VSM look for additional sources of income by establishing an active alumni association which also will play an important role in building the image and the reputation of the institution (see below). VSM will be well aware of the other possible sources for financial support such as the securing of academic sponsorship from successful Slovaks within and outside the country, from the leading businesses in Slovakia and elsewhere, as well, of course, by applying for research and partnership grants from the EU.

Image

As stated earlier, it is believed that the national and international image of VSM, whilst not bad, could be greatly improved. The current programmes directed at the recruiting of students via such actions as open door visiting days, school visits, and the development of better contacts with Slovak businesses where VSM graduates are, or could be, employed are excellent and should be continued and enlarged.

It is recommended further that VSM put greater attention into the website, and the production of a regular newsletter, both on the web and in hard copy, with active participation from all members of the VSM community: management, teachers, support staff and students. It is suggested that VSM has already produced a sufficient number of graduates to form the core nucleus of an alumni association. As the VSM management is already well aware, such an association could play an increasingly important role in building a school spirit, developing contacts with the various sectors in which they are engaged, in enlisting support, and, in general, in disseminating the image of the institution.

The rewards of a heightened profile are many, including greater recruitment of both local and international students, enhanced appreciation by political masters, and the possibility of financial endowments and scholarships by Slovak business and successful Slovaks in the USA and elsewhere.

Conclusion

As stated in several parts of this report, the Team was impressed by the accomplishments of VSM in its relatively short existence, its capacity to adapt to its changing environment, and to meet and overcome a number of contextual challenges. VSM exhibits specific strengths in:

- compliance with Bologna process requirements, highlighted by the recent inclusion in the ERASMUS mobility programme;
- student-centred learning;
- opportunities for increased mobility, thanks, in particular, to the use of English language instruction;
- provision of opportunities for lifelong learning via its diverse and flexible course offering and in particular through its well developed e-learning programme.

The Team has already made a number of recommendations which it considers could be helpful to VSM in continuing its development. Most of these recommendations represent lines of actions already identified by VSM. A summary is presented below:

1. *Vision:* the Team recommends
 - that VSM review its mission statement and define a strategic development plan
 - that this review involve all stakeholders in order to foster a sense of ownership.
2. *Quality assessment – Quality assurance*
 - to adopt a holistic approach to QA and establish a separate QA function
 - to keep abreast of all developments in the field of QA in Europe
 - to involve all stakeholders, including students, in the further definition of QA standards for VSM;
3. *Bologna process:* to continue in the direction of implementing the recommendations of the Bologna process, making plans for ongoing participation in the ERASMUS programme, pursuing application for the ECTS label;
4. *Research:*
 - to establish a separate research office
 - for the research office to act as a liaison by keeping staff informed and alerting them to developments of research in Europe, advising staff about grants and grants application
 - to devise a strategic plan for the establishment of a PhD cycle within 4 to 5 years.
5. *Student services:*
 - to consider setting up a counselling and career guidance office
 - to improve registration procedures and student files management with the use of appropriate software
 - to provide more space for student lounge, study rooms and general student facilities as soon as it is feasible
 - to build housing facilities in Bratislava and extend those already in Trenčín as soon as it is feasible
 - to encourage the development of student activities and campus life.
6. *Internationalisation:*
 - to participate actively in the ERASMUS programme and continue participating in other international exchange programmes
 - to join a number of European and international HEI organisations
 - in particular to establish contacts with other institutions offering e-learning
 - to adopt a more aggressive strategy to recruit foreign students.
7. *Funding:*
 - to develop a strategy to decrease the dependency on tuition fees and find other funding sources
 - to encourage authorities to establish favourable sets of rules.

8. *Image – Profiling*

- to develop a strategy of heightened profile
- to develop and improve communication tools: website, newsletter
- to establish and support an active alumni association.

In conclusion, the Team wishes to reiterate its praise to VSM for its accomplishments over less than one decade. From a position of dependency from City University, VSM has moved to partnership with, and is even influencing, its parent institution. Most importantly, the success, quality of education, innovative approaches, healthy financial state of VSM shows that private higher education can and does make a valuable contribution to building a knowledge based society in the Slovak Republic.

We, the members of the Team, feel privileged to have been invited to visit VSM. We are grateful for the generous hospitality, for the openness, that we found and we wish VSM continued successful growth along with valuable participation in the higher education area in the Slovak Republic, in Europe and in the rest of the world.