

University of Łódź

Assessment report in the first competition under the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme

1st criterion - substantive quality of an application:

- a) the quality of a SWOT analysis with respect to the objectives referred to in paragraph 4 of Communication from the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 26 March 2019 on the first competition under the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme, including the quality of the analysis used to identify priority research areas;
- b) conciseness and concreteness of the SWOT analysis and the plan;
- c) relevance of the identification of the specific objectives referred to in paragraph 6(2)(a) and paragraph 8 of Communication from the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 26 March 2019 on the first competition under the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme in relation to the SWOT analysis results;
- d) appropriateness of the indicators chosen to describe the university’s potential and to measure the extent of the objectives’ attainment;

Substantiation

a) The SWOT analysis is well thought through, thorough and detailed, using statistical and qualitative data as well as interviews. The analysis meets the objectives of paragraph 4. The SWOT is evaluated in the context of the University mission, giving it coherence and strategic direction. UŁ has decided on a set of highly diverse international benchmark institutions. The analysis achieves a balanced and objective critique, revealing a concern for “poor academic productivity”, which will need to be addressed. The SWOT places great emphasis on external factors and could be more specific to the University of Łódź, with a more detailed self-assessment. The University intends to target 3 priority areas, which reflect its research strengths.

b) The SWOT is well structured, if a little long. The PEST and SWOT tables are helpful. The conclusion is general in nature and may aid internal reform, but it may not be sufficiently specific for the University of Łódź.

c) The plan is very ambitious. Embedded cultural change takes a long time and will require strong management, even after recognising the progress already made, which was described in the interview. Too many objectives are identified, but these are mostly relevant and satisfy paragraphs 6(2)(a) and 8, but could be more specific and clearer. The development plan is comprehensive, but it may not be realistic to deliver all aspects in the timescale.

d) The Indicators are appropriate but some targets are very challenging. More than doubling of the percentage published articles in the top 10% (5.6% to 12.5%) and significantly increasing the citation rate in five years is extremely ambitious, although data shown during the interview indicated a significant uplift in publications in the top 10% of journals in 2019. Maintaining and growing this performance will be the key to success, as UoŁ recognise. Indicators for international students and staff are appropriate.

2nd criterion - relevance of assumed objectives to enhancing the international significance of the university's activity:

- a) the extent to which specific objectives contribute to attaining the objectives referred to in paragraph 4 of Communication from the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 26 March 2019 on the first competition under the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme;**
- b) sustainability of specific objectives after the plan implementation period, taking into account, in particular, actions to be carried out in 2026.**

Substantiation

a) The specific objectives in the plan would bring the University of Łódź in line with the objectives of paragraph 4, if they can be achieved in the timescale of the Initiative. It is a well-intended ambitious plan and relies on the academic community rapidly changing the way it works, embracing a more interdisciplinary approach. It is not completely clear how the university would restructure itself to deliver this approach and how management and governance would address any re-organisation. Some clarification was given in the interview, showing a new PRA-based structure with three parallel sub-organisations to facilitate the initiative, coupling to the existing Faculty and interdisciplinary structure. Internationalisation relies on relatively few drivers which may not be sufficient e.g. the plans identify five existing partnerships but many more would be needed (additional research collaborations were listed in further clarification). Relying on the increase in international accreditations is unlikely to be enough to create a significant shift in rankings.

b) The plans could help create sustainability of the specific objectives. A strong point appears to be the aim to reflect the development strategy of the city of Łódź. There are a large number of operational objectives, actions and incentives in the plan which could deliver renewal. These will require a strong stable leadership at all levels to deliver a successful change management strategy. Sustaining the plan requires a means of rapidly improving the research performance and then maintaining it into the future. Data shown in the interview did reveal a significant improvement in 2019. It is still likely to require a review and changes to the faculty structure. The University of Łódź may need to close down a number of activities outside of the priority areas, which is not being proposed at present. Successful delivery of the plans could diversify income and sustain the initiatives beyond 2026.

3rd criterion - adequacy of described actions to the assumed objectives:

- a) appropriateness of the actions selected, including actions of ground-breaking and innovative nature, in the context of the specific objectives' implementation;**
- b) feasibility of the activities given the university's potential and budget;**

Substantiation

a) The overall plan could meet the objectives, although appropriateness and likely effectiveness vary for the various objectives. The plan has an innovative philosophy and its desire is to be a leader in 'discovering the unobvious with change-producing potential'. Reorganising the University of Łódź's academic activities in 3 interdisciplinary programs related to global and local grand challenges is a very bold move, and for a traditional university in reality a "ground breaking" move. PRA1 "Promised land 2.0" is innovative and may be too broadly based. It was evident from the interview that the key to the success of this strategy will be how the existing Faculties and interdisciplinary centres interact with the three new PRA sub-organisations that are proposed, as a substantial shift will be needed. The interview claimed good progress is being made in cultural/organisational changes. One action that seems too radical is zero-hour appointments to facilitate applications for grants (this type of appointment would not be eligible for grant funding in many other countries).

b) It is questionable whether all of the actions are feasible given the university's past record, although data shown at the interview was very encouraging. If they are delivered and sustained then the international visibility and publication record will improve. It will need a big shift to move from 'low productivity and research effectiveness' that the SWOT reveals, to deliver the objectives. It relies on the 'untapped potential' and places great emphasis on the principal investigators. The plans to move to a meritocracy and change the organisation are appropriate, but will need a sustained substantial culture change and this strategy might not achieve all the other dimensions in this Initiative. The proposed plans could be accommodated within the revised budget and focusing on 3 priority research areas could allow the plans to be achieved if the cultural and organisational changes are delivered.

4th criterion - potential of the university in terms of:

- a) the impact of the university's research activity on the development of world science, especially in priority research areas;**
- b) research collaboration with research institutions of high international reputation, especially in priority research areas;**
- c) the quality of education provision for students and doctoral training, especially in fields of study and disciplines of science related to priority research areas;**
- d) the solutions deployed for the professional development of the university's staff, especially young scientists;**
- e) the quality of university governance and management;**

f) other specific objectives to raise the international significance of the university's activities if these objectives have been determined in the plan.

Substantiation

a) The plans would take time to deliver a significant increase in impact on the development of world science, even allowing for the projected improvement in publication quality and 2019 results shown in the interview. Focusing in the 3 priority areas should help, but these are internationally highly competitive areas and their would need to be strong buy-in from the existing Faculties as well as the interdisciplinary centres.

b) Opportunities exist for international research collaborations, but the university would need to become much more proactive and it is likely that a wider group of leading international universities will be needed, even after recognising UoŁ's clarification in the level of international engagement and co-publication, and that UoŁ will expand the cooperation with leading international universities.

c) The teaching quality appears traditional although inclusion of modern platforms for distance learning and teaching blocks may help. Operational objectives such as a reduced student:staff ratio, mobility and study programs, mentoring program, research-integration into the curriculum and student research grants are all positive initiatives.

d) The University of Łódź's staff development plan includes good incentives and measures for younger academic staff, and UoŁ clarified that plans (not in text) will increase the competencies and opportunities for all staff.

e) The analysis behind the plan is good, and identifies the need for 'changing the organizational culture and creating a new leadership model', but it is not clear how much capacity there is for change management, notwithstanding the helpful discussion at the interview. Operational objectives have less emphasis on governance and leadership, both of which are crucial for success.

f) In general, it is clear that the University of Łódź has seriously engaged in a substantial change plan, which would lead the university to a much better standing among European Universities if carried out.

Summary of assessment

The University of Łódź has presented an objective and detailed self-evaluation, presenting a view of how the university is positioned within Poland's and Europe's higher education landscape. The plans focus on three priority research areas, which is appropriate for the University, although the areas chosen are internationally very competitive. The development plan is very ambitious and, in some respects, innovative and it could have the potential to be game-changing internally and externally. The proposed "Promised Land" focus is interesting but it will be challenging to gain international visibility. There are some real strengths in this proposal and in particular the plans to support and develop staff and students are both achievable. The plans to move to a meritocracy and change the organisation are highly desirable. The plan to increase the number of foreign accreditations is a

positive initiative but the submission would benefit from a stronger focus on raising international impact (outside Europe) and by building further international research collaborations, beyond existing partners. The proposed plans are very ambitious in many areas and would require strong leadership and commitment as well as buy-in from the academic staff. In particular the time-scale to address ‘poor academic productivity’ identified in the analysis and improve the quality of research and achieve outputs that would raise the international profile of the university is very demanding, bearing in mind the past performance and trend, although the research publication and funding data for 2019 shown in the interview was very encouraging. It would still be a challenge to ensure that some aspects of the plan would be sustained into the future. Based on the extensive written material and statistics provided in the analysis, the plan seems unlikely to be fully implemented and to become sustainable in the timescale of the Initiative. This is partly due to expected internal resistance and partly due to too high expectations of the speed of substantial change in internal cultures and in development of partnerships. The interview revealed that a change programme is underway. The possibilities and benefits from greater cooperation with the other universities in Łódź have not been fully explored. There is no discussion about whether some underperforming academic areas might be scaled down/closed, which would free-up resources to focus on the priority areas. The University would benefit from revising its mission and aligning all its policies and practice before committing to its well-intentioned ambitious goals. Overall, in their present form, it is hard to see how the plans could be largely delivered in the timescale and sustained. In view of the relatively short time to deliver the plans and achieve the performance shown in the indicators, it is recommended that the University implements its change programme and new organisational structure and reviews its mission in the near future to position itself well for success in future funding competitions. The reviewers recommend:

- Continuing to deliver the culture change across the University and improved research performance and build stronger international recognition.
- Considering revising the mission and policies to align with the new direction and plans.
- Build on existing collaborations with local institutions and explore potential mergers, especially with Medical University of Łódź.

Total score

24.0 / 40

Recommendation

Negative