

Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences

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

The SWOT analysis presented by the UPWr develops the university’s strengths in much detail, based on the success from the strategic development started in 2013. The university describes itself as modern and ambitious, with a rich partnership network and a particular emphasis on an efficient and professional working environment. A situation, which can be seen as a result of the earlier initiated strategy process. The other parts of the SWOT analysis are rather poorly developed. Limited explanations are given regarding opportunities and threats. Some relevant weaknesses are mentioned and mirrored by corrective actions. Representing a defined spectrum of faculties in environmental and life sciences, UPWr is not what we consider a “comprehensive” university. This profile clearly determines its mission which aims to promote the achievement of the global sustainable development goals with excellent science. The plan is presented in an unusual structure and with a not always consistent terminology. The concept is built on three main pillars, which include the six major objectives designed to strengthen the three POBs. The POBs are all interdisciplinary, covering seven leading research disciplines and they are strongly supported by international cooperation, which is presented explicitly. There are several international projects and international funding is documented. In the strategy process, 15 leading research groups were selected. They are the backbone of the three POBs (five each) and represent the seven main disciplines. While the objective for improving quality of education is focused on graduate students,

under ‘other specific objectives’, scientific circles for students and a research-oriented education have been described. The strategy for education should be further developed. The application puts not much emphasis on the weaknesses, which suggest that the university might underestimate the challenges it will face in the excellence process.

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

The objectives are organized in three pillars, of which the first (strengthening internationalization) is expected to provide a foundation for the development of all three POBs. The UPWr is already quite strong in the POBs Food Sciences and Technology and Veterinary Science and will be able to increase its international impact and visibility in these areas. The third POB, Environmental Sciences, is somewhat less convincing in terms of ranking, but involved in a large international project. All three POBs have institutional international partnerships and the UPWr supports international exchange of researchers and participates in several Erasmus+ and other projects of mobility in higher education. The objective addressing the improvement of the quality of education is highly focused on the doctoral school and lacks a clear overall education strategy. The doctoral school is an important measure for international visibility and it is important to evaluate its development in 5-6 years from now for getting relevant insights into its quality. For the internationalization, the support system which UPWr is going to offer for all staff and students, including foreign scientists and students, is essential. It includes participation in international conferences, application for international awards and funding, support for open access publications and support in writing publications. Measures for students are integrated into various objectives and actions, making it somewhat difficult to get a good overview. In summary, the objectives of the UPWr are in general suitable and indicate a future potential to become an international recognized research university, even though the objectives are not yet fully in line with the requirements from the Ministry's Communication.

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

The schedule for the implementation of the plan is organized in six actions, each of which is meant to contribute to the achievement of several objectives, making it not easy to evaluate their potential and adequacy. About 75% of the budget for the implementation actions is earmarked for continuing a motivation and grant system. This is certainly a very important action, but it could have been split for the sake of clarity and to make it easier to estimate the potential. Its importance lies in the overall development of the cultural change, spanning all groups from students to professors. This action is also important for mobility and international exposure of all staff members. While the large amount of money for this action might be justifiable, a number of questions about this central future investment can be raised, including how the selection for the respective 'awards' will be achieved. As an important action, the improvement of the organizational and legal service system has been started. The action 'human resources development' is again covering all groups and is designed to create an attractive international working environment. A special support system for foreign scientists and students is supporting this idea. The development of IT systems is important for research, education and administration and should be pursued. Last, but not least, the monitoring and external evaluation action, which are essential for the long-term success of the plan, are not described in enough detail. The funding for presentation, evaluation and communication of the results of the strategy is planned for 2026, however it is not fully convincing, since it lacks a monitoring system necessary for possible adaptations and corrections in the implementation of the actions in the funding period. In addition, the sustainability beyond the 7 years is not clear.

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

UPWr is a specialized university with a good potential in its region, and possibly within Poland and internationally. Due to the fact that the University started a strategy process in 2013, the underlying concept is rather well thought-through and with the already achieved international cooperation, the UPWr laid a sound basis for the excellence strategy. The whole concept is built on interdisciplinarity, concentrated for the five objectives in three pillars. The six major actions are distinct and well designed, specifically for UPWr. UPWr is a rather small university with a low number of international students and staff and is still low in the national rankings compared with the other universities. However, amongst the agricultural universities in Poland, UPWr is ranked as number one in the national ranking “Perspektywy” in 2019. Spending most of the money for motivation of people seems important for the cultural change and should be seen in connection with the existing high quality research infrastructure in the UPWr. There seem to be well-equipped and modern laboratories available. The question, whether there is an efficient IT-infrastructure is not fully answered. The approach for a modern governance system is not yet fully convincing, while the cooperation with business partners is well described. An open question is the way in which the university wants to develop its relationship with the other universities in Wroclaw and in other parts of Poland. Concerning the research infrastructure and joint methodology and equipment, a closer collaboration with the other universities in Wroclaw, especially the TU of Wroclaw would be recommendable. If past performance is valued, there are still doubts about the extent to which UPWr can develop into a research-intensive university. Looking at the recent development, however, the potential for future development to an international research university is conceivable.

Summary of assessment

The application of the Wroclaw University of Environmental and Life Sciences (UPWr) builds on an earlier strategy process starting in 2013. This process has been in parts successful and has led to the selection of three POBs with relevant research topics. Via this process, UPWr established several international institutional cooperation agreements and started the internationalization process on many levels. Moreover, it started a doctoral school for enhancing the support to its graduate students. The UPWr has a clear mission and puts ‘social responsibility and sustainability at the forefront of members’ minds’. It wants to take strong actions in that direction. This is a suitable and unique concept for this university. In the strategy process the UPWr created a stimulating environment and built up a good infrastructure. In particular, the support of early career scientists has been established and new educational tools have been implemented. The application has two clear weaknesses: 1. the SWOT analysis is mainly concentrated on strengths and relatively few lines are dedicated to opportunities, weaknesses and threats. And 2. the description of the strategy is not very clear and rather hard to read. In general, the set of implementation actions is not

sufficiently comprehensive in addressing the objectives identified by the Ministry. In addition, the lack of a vision on a new leadership and governance structure could negatively affect the implementation of the proposed plan. In the interviews, the new governance structure was discussed. The faculties should be responsible for the educational affairs, while research is organized in departments and the POBs. The UPWr will establish disciplinary councils to guide the strategy process. This governance concept is interesting, however, not yet fully convincing. In any case a change process such as it has been proposed will take strong and sustained leadership, which may be envisioned at UPWr. The panel would encourage UPWr to continue its development process. Another question discussed in the interviews was, the cooperation with other local universities. Cooperation with the much larger University of Wrocław and the Wrocław University of Science and Technology is not yet planned systematically. Only individual activities and scientific collaborations exist. Strategically, it might be important to consider closer collaborations or a federation of the three universities in Wrocław that were also pre-selected in the Excellence Initiative. The UPWr is on a good track and has the potential to become an international research university. It is, however, still somewhat unclear whether the university has a realistic and adequate understanding of where it is now, and how it can develop to where it wants to be in six years from now.

Total score

27.5 / 40

Recommendation

Negative