

**Reflections on the Second Progress Review Conference
of the
20 Universities in the “Excellence Initiative – Research Universities” program
At Jagiellonian University in Kraków, September 2021**

*Professor Przemysław Czarnek, Minister of Education and Science, and
Professor Włodzimierz Bernacki, Secretary of State, Ministry of Education and Science, and
Mr. Wojciech Murdzek, Secretary of State, Ministry of Education and Science*

The team of international experts highly appreciates this opportunity to reflect on progress made within the framework of the IDUB program. We acknowledge the effort made by your colleagues at the Ministry and within the 20 selected universities to make IDUB a successful program. Indeed, we must underscore the importance of continued support of the IDUB program, because it is in the mid- to long term that the Polish economy and society can expect to reap the greatest benefits of this reform program. Of course, we must take note of the disruption caused by the pandemic and recognize its effect on the development of academic institutions. In fact, universities have in very short time reinvented their mode of action and found new ways of integrating with the global community.

The Second Progress Review Conference at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow was addressed by Secretary of State Mr. *Wojciech Murdzek*. It has been very successful conference not least due to the excellent venue and organization under the leadership of Rector, professor *Jacek Popiel*.

Within the new legal framework, the purpose of the excellence program is to stimulate a small number of Poland’s universities to become on a par with Europe’s best research-intensive universities.

The conference was preceded by reports from the participating Universities where they had responded to 10 questions proposed by the expert panel in no more than 500 words/one page and including, where appropriate, concise, clear evidence to support the answers. The responses were expected to provide relevant insights into the main developments in the universities during the last two years.

- *What mechanisms have you adopted for the development of the research careers of your academic staff (both established and early-career), bearing in mind the need to pay appropriate attention to equity of treatment and accommodation of particular requirements (such as parental leave)?*
- *What success can you report in engaging with outstanding researchers from both within and beyond Poland (recognising that recruitment may have been constrained by the pandemic)?*
- *How do you approach the prioritisation of research areas, recognising the need both to support existing strengths and enable the development of new areas of prominence?*
- *What approaches have you taken to inter-institutional collaborations and mergers in Poland, with the objective of optimising research excellence in your institution?*

- *In what ways have you developed international interactions and collaborations, recognising the constraints (but also the opportunities) associated with the Covid-19 pandemic?*
- *What evidence do you have of broad commitment within your university (across all categories of staff and including the governing board) to the objectives you have set under the IDUB initiative?*
- *What mechanisms have you established for self-assessment of progress towards your IDUB objectives?*
- *What governance or organisational changes have you made with the specific intention of advancing research excellence?*
- *In what ways have you shared best practice with other universities within the IDUB initiative?*
- *What are the major difficulties, if there are any, you have experienced in implementing your strategy?*

Two years into implementation there is no doubt that the IDUB-program has made an impact on how Poland's universities are doing business. It is noticeable that a plethora of different measures and programs are being developed and that universities have been stimulated to a highly desirable development. It is recognized that universities' visibility and global impact depends on the strength of their international networks, and it is appreciated that further integration with European sister universities is desirable. We confirmed a clear mood of change among institutional leadership and their commitment to strive for research excellence. During this year's review conference, however, the near-uniform enthusiasm evident hitherto has become more heterogeneous; some universities retain that enthusiasm, for others this is less evident.

There are some excellent examples in the written submissions, which indicate good staff development schemes, recruitment and retention actions – and delivery, good equality schemes, and a strategic approach to research career development from early career researchers through to high performing senior staff. A continuing emphasis on issues of equity is required; we note, for example, that the senior leadership of Poland's universities is predominantly male. A few universities mixed 'business as usual' into their answers for initiatives and this was a little disappointing and was not the aim of the questions or the IDUB scheme.

However, it was encouraging to learn both from written materials received prior to the conference and from many panel interventions that staff and students have benefitted from new transparent internal and often highly competitive programs, and new research initiatives in which universities have recruited foreign research students and staff in spite of Covid-19 disruption. Indeed, in some cases the circumstances of the pandemic have been turned to advantage, with for example enhanced participation in international forums without the need for (and expense of) foreign travel. The introduction by one university of "virtual research visits" is likely to represent a model that persists beyond the current pandemic. In the majority of cases, Poland's universities have efficiently adapted to pandemic conditions, and medical schools have played a key role for the country. For a small minority, however, the pandemic appears to have had a significantly discouraging effect on progress towards IDUB goals.

Overall, there is evidence of good progress in meeting IDUB goals and launching initiatives to improve research excellence and retain and attract the best staff. Generally, the 'Top-10' universities are performing much better (they are funded of course for this), but several 'runner-up' universities are also making good progress and some have used their own funding to launch significant new initiatives. Several universities in both the Top-10 and Runner-Up groups have taken a highly strategic and structural approach to developing research excellence and staff development with career support; they also show some clear evidence of progress. Other universities have shown good intentions, but have still to deliver actual initiatives, although there are usually some clear actions in place. Some universities, however, are still in the earlier stages of putting their plans into practice (even one or two Top 10 institutions). Finally, a very small number of institutions appear to have a long way to go in instituting schemes to support research excellence and develop their staff, thereby improving their research position.

The initiatives taken by universities can be as classified as:

- Stimulus: funding scholarships, grants, bonuses, named chairs, etc.
- Proactive: training, staff development schemes to improve skills etc., new initiatives and funding new ideas/developments.
- Responsive: paying for progress achieved (papers, grants etc.), making changes to improve areas that are not performing.

Most universities appear to focus more on stimulus and responsive actions; a smaller number have some very good proactive schemes as well.

In staff development, it is important that the staff review process engages with staff – we heard examples where the staff were evaluated 'silently' and this is not good practice. Staff need to hear what their peers/managers think of their performance (with evidence) and the managers need to hear from staff! This discursive approach can then inform the staff development process – how do managers know what staff need in the way of development if they are not asked!

There was not as much emphasis on training and genuine individual staff development as we would have expected. Some universities did mention this explicitly and apparently had excellent schemes illustrated with good examples and evidence of success. Several others did not even mention training/development and focused on stimulus/motivation using funding.

Areas deserving attention include the further stimulation of academic staff mobility within Poland, and investigation of the possibilities of sharing human resources between universities. Also, avoiding superfluous procedures and structures, and maintaining generational change as a means to success would continue to merit attention.

Generally, universities report improved research performance; some have continued established programs and many universities can demonstrate an increased focus on research quality and the concentration of research activities in areas of strength. The international experts would expect universities to reach some of their immediate goals during the third year of implementation, accordingly they are expected to demonstrate concrete results within the coming academic year. Therefore, we would expect universities to present clear evidence of progress next year, together with a more explicit enunciation of final and intermediate goals.

The international panel members have the following observations to take into account during the next phase of implementation:

Human capital

- Achieving a critical mass of excellent and flexible minds is crucially important. Therefore, attracting and retaining advanced human capital is a prerequisite to excellence and transformation. Sustaining and improving highest possible performance of staff, universities are advised to provide training opportunities and adequate support structures of researchers at all career stages, and to ensure attention to the interface between early career and senior tenured research positions.
- Developing Poland's graduate schools is a main focal point and it would be beneficial to further institutionalize a post. doc. system both for national and international mobility. In addition, it is advisable to continue to invest in international academic networks, aiming at (inter alia) committed research collaboration involving advanced students, and co-publication for a global readership.

Research Prioritization

- Rise and fall of priority fields must be in focus, because priority research areas will evolve, and identification of emerging areas is key to success. Any university may only achieve a global leadership position in a few fields of study, so that the selection of appropriate fields must be a priority.
- Focusing on a dynamic development of prioritized research areas and developing ways and means to validate success. For this reason, universities may address in a more focused way on "what success looks like"; the attention to achieving progress must be shifted towards reaching specified goals.
- Actively adjusting their research portfolio in accordance with needs and opportunities, and incentivizing quality measures across disciplines, while achieving a balance between supporting priority research areas and ensuring a baseline of high quality.

Maintaining focus on a university-wide mission

- Importance of maintaining the commitment of colleagues outside of the priority research areas or immediately emerging areas – not least because they may represent future of areas of strength.
- Ensuring the continued support of the development of academic teaching competencies among the university's academic staff. During the post pandemic period it would be advisable to integrate experiences and innovations obtained during the Covid-19 pandemic into future education and research practice.

Consolidating Poland's research and higher education system

- Specifically, supporting the idea of mergers of medical universities and other more specialised institutions with the more comprehensive universities/science & technology institutions. This would speed up progress on IDUB goals and provide a greater infrastructure and support network within the merged institution.
- Considering integration also with research institutes, notably those of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

- Further exploring opportunities for consolidating existing resources on a national scale. Progress has been significant in some regions (notably Gdansk) but a broader appreciation of the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches – beyond the competences of highly specialized institutions – deserves wider recognition.

We have observed a continuing sense of purpose in the sector inspired by increased autonomy and accountability under the new Law for Higher Education and the IDUB program. A few institutions expressed some continued frustration with the legal framework, but this appears to represent a minority view. Almost all presentations confirmed that most programs are now based on competition. Integration of good practices at the universities is wide spread, and universities underscored how the fresh IDUB resources have contributed significantly. Some of the universities demonstrate excellent and innovative use of their resources in order to achieve IDUB goals. The international panel noted that not all universities make use of the flexibility of financing under the IDUB program and would encourage universities to fully explore their options with the Ministry.

The importance of competition, within a supportive environment, in individual universities may be extended to the Polish higher education sector as a whole. The competitive principles on which the IDUB program is appropriately based need not preclude a healthy exchange of ideas and good practice between the IDUB universities, and we urge that this should continue to be encouraged.

A key feature of the Excellence Initiative was achievability within the relatively short timescale through to December 2025. It takes a very long time to change traditions and embedded institutionalized practices; in order to reach higher impact on international front-line research, the realistic time-scale is decades rather than years and sustaining improved performance will be crucial. It is very important that this fact is recognized by Poland's government and authorities. Broader society expects that investments in science and research will be capitalized through innovations in the economic sectors and in society at large. However, it is important that the Polish universities commit themselves to strive towards excellence for many years to come and to integrate to the largest possible extent in the international academic community in order for Poland to tap into the global pool of knowledge. Equally, it is important to recognize that substantial progress towards achieving international prominence in research – and important contributions to the Polish society and economy - can be achieved alongside the gradual culture change that is an important objective of the IDUB initiative.

For Poland to continue the country's path towards being a modern competitive knowledge economy it is important that the research universities perform at par with their European peer institutions; in this respect the IDUB-program and the new Law for Higher Education are very important conditions. However, further investments to expand the IDUB-program, and to support real integration in the research and higher education system would be desirable. In case aspects of the Polish legal framework would hinder concrete consolidation efforts, we would encourage the Government and Ministry to find ways to alleviate such obstacles and provide incentives for making Poland's research system stronger from an international perspective.

Finally, we encourage all stakeholders to join forces and continue the ongoing change process within Poland's best universities, engage the academic community, and stimulate enthusiasm in Polish academia.

On behalf of the International Review Panel members: professors *Enric Banda, Simon Gaskell, Éva Kondorosi, Peter Maassen, and Christopher Snowden.*

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen', written in a cursive style.

Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen
Chairman of the International Review Panel