

ISAB visit to MUNI, 4.-6. June 2024

4. June

The ISAB met with the vice-rector for research and doctoral studies, Šárka Pospíšilová, who introduced the panel to the programme for the coming days. The panel then met with the rector *in camera*. During the informal exchange, the rector informed the panel of the current standing of the MUNI in university ratings and emphasized the importance of the role of the ISAB for his efforts in restructuring the university. He outlined the primary achievements of MUNI during the past 18 months and introduced the panel to plans of integrating the Faculty of Pharmacy into MUNI. He thanked the panel for its continuing efforts to restructure the PhD programs and encouraged it to continue its good work. The panel will of course continue to monitor progress of the restructuring process, but pointed out that it is now up to MUNI to strengthen its efforts in implementing the suggested changes where possible. In this regard it was encouraging to learn that MUNI is attempting to supplement the income of PhD students so that their salary will reach at least 1.2 times the minimum wage (as provided for under the forthcoming national legislation). The panel found this commendable, but it is important that ways be found of implementing this change in all faculties. The ISAB expressed its readiness to focus on other aspects of MUNI management, specifically on faculty recruitment strategy and ways to attract to MUNI internationally recognised talent. The rector briefly introduced the ISAB to the various schemes in MUNI of recruiting and rewarding promising, primarily young, scientists, which the panel found of key importance.

5. June

The ISAB heard a presentation by the vice-rector for research and doctoral studies, Šárka Pospíšilová, which introduced the ISAB to the MUNI in numbers: student and PhD student numbers, the budget and its distribution, and performance indicators. The latter topic became the subject of extensive discussion with the ISAB, particularly with respect to evaluation of performance in humanities. It appears that performance markers in the Czech Republic are important for budget allocation, but it is accepted that definition of the benchmarks is not unambiguous. For this reason, 32% of the MUNI budget are allocated to social sciences and humanities, in order to provide the latter faculties with stable financing that is not dependent on performance.

The MUNI grant agency, GAMU, distributes EUR 4 Mio per annum in various award schemes that focus on excellence, as already mentioned during the ISAB meeting with the rector. The ISAB considers this investment in talented, primarily young, scientist as key for the future development of MUNI and recommends that the schemes be continued and if possible expanded. Every effort should be made to raise additional funds for this scheme, because this will increase the performance-based funding of MUNI and thus all faculties, including those not primarily engaged in research, are likely to profit from this scheme.

The following presentation by Michal Petr, entitled “Results and impact of Internal Research and Doctoral Programme Evaluation” (IRDE), introduced the ISAB to the internal evaluation of MUNI, in which 109 units were self-evaluated with the help of 92 evaluators. In all, 800 persons participated. The shortcomings were mostly in line with those highlighted by the ISAB during its past visits. Now that an independent confirmation of the ISAB recommendations is available, it is important that the pace of implementation of the needed changes be increased. It was encouraging to see that a number of faculties are making substantial effort to comply with the recommendations of the evaluation, and it is hoped that the remaining ones will see the benefits of implementing the recommendations of the evaluators.

The ISAB was encouraged to see the creation of “contracts” between the Rector and the Deans of each faculty as a result of the evaluation process. In implementing these plans prior to the next round of evaluation, the faculties should be encouraged to improve the quality of their faculty resources and PhD recruits (especially focused on admitting the most motivated students likely to become future leaders).

The afternoon session concerned a discussion of PhD programs of MUNI in the presence of representatives of the various faculties. The strategic advisor to the vice rector on the PhD Programs, Luděk Bláha, mentioned in his presentation the primary concerns of the University: guarantee of the minimum income of PhD students as mentioned by the rector, reduction in the number of students and PhD programs, improvement in the quality of supervision and the setting up of doctoral schools.

From the following discussion it transpired that most students do not have a PhD committee, and the general opinion seemed to be that these are not necessary, or feasible, particularly in the humanities. The ISAB attempted to clarify the need for individual committees and became aware that many of those present foresaw problems and complications that would not actually arise if the measures were implemented correctly. One worry concerned the funding of the committee visits and of the extracurricular costs of the programs. The ISAB understands these difficulties but feels that the importance of an investment in PhD students, on which the university depends for its future, is such that novel ways must be sought to find new sources of funding, e.g. from external sources (such as industry and companies). The ISAB would like to commend the achievements and efforts of Luděk Bláha and strongly encourages him to continue.

In the late afternoon, the ISAB visited the impressive SIMU facility, an example of the outstanding infrastructure of MUNI, which it should be proud of and build on. The MUNI must now capitalise on facilities such as this, CEITEC and the whole new campus, and do its utmost to recruit to Brno top students, but most importantly, top teachers and researchers.

The ISAB then met with PhD student representatives of the various faculties. In an informal and frank exchange, the panel learned that most students did not have PhD committees, and that some of those who did, felt that the committees were not working the way they were intended to as outlined by the ISAB. Most worryingly, the number of students who felt that they or their colleagues were not properly supervised and guided was very high. The ISAB was also given the impression that many students – particularly those in social sciences and humanities – had substantial teaching commitments. Importantly, the overwhelming majority of the present students wished to have PhD committees and PhD Programs such as those described to them by the ISAB members.

Recommendations:

1. The ISAB would like to strongly encourage MUNI to continue its efforts in implementing PhD Programs. The PhD Program model has been implemented in most top universities in the Western world and has clearly shown its benefits. The ISAB is absolutely convinced that, if correctly implemented, PhD Programs will dramatically improve the quality and the motivation of the students, that they will broaden the students' horizons and their performance, and substantially reduce the drop-out rates. In addition, they will make MUNI students more competitive and attractive on the postdoctoral market, which will benefit MUNI reputation and ranking in the medium to long term. The ISAB is convinced that once a number of PhD Programs implement the recommended changes, the benefits will rapidly become apparent and convince the sceptics of their value not only for the students, but also for the PIs.
2. The ISAB would like to reiterate its 2018 recommendation that excessive teaching during the four-year study period should be avoided. It would be highly desirable if the teaching role and load of both PhD students and staff of all ranks in all faculties and institutes were gathered and made available.
3. The ISAB understands that implementation of PhD programs may take time but ensuring that all MUNI faculties accept only the best students for PhD studies is an essential measure that should be implemented without delay. ISAB recommends that MUNI initiate a close dialog with PhD specialization boards (oborové rady), particularly in faculties of social sciences and humanities, in order to learn how these boards function and how they ascertain that their PhD students satisfy the standards required to gain a title of Doctor of Philosophy.

The ISAB would like to sincerely thank MUNI for its hospitality, particularly those persons involved in the organisation of its visit. The ISAB is very grateful to all MUNI faculty and students for their readiness to take part in all discussions and for their openness. The Board would like to thank, in particular, to the MUNI leadership for its forward-looking attitude and tireless efforts to improve the scientific standing and standards of its Institution. The ISAB is highly impressed with (and often jealous of) MUNI facilities and it will continue to do its best to help the University leadership fill this excellent infrastructure with top scientists at all levels. Should the MUNI leadership require advice on topics that might help accelerate this process, the ISAB would be most happy to try and help.

Prepared on 6th of June 2024 by the MU ISAB members - Marie-Janine Calic, Christiane Druml, Josef Jiříčný, Peter Williamson, Viktor Kunčak - chaired by Josef Jiříčný.