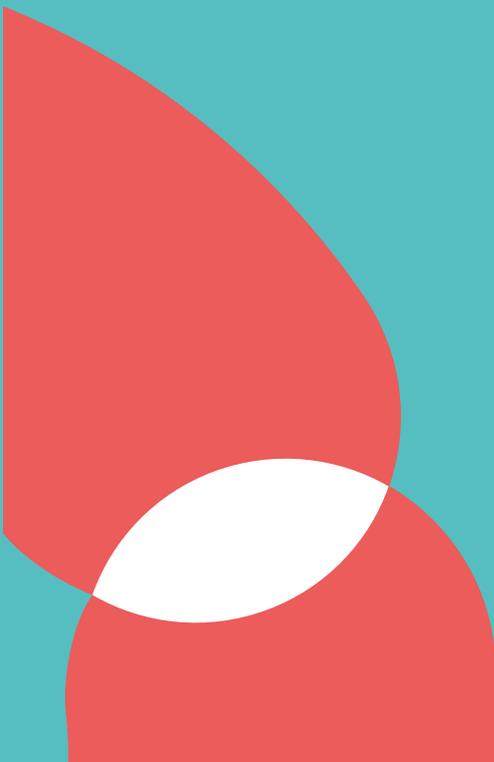


KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW • ASSESSMENT REPORT

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1 Abstract

The panel that conducted the institutional review of the KU Leuven advises the NVAO to make a positive institutional review decision. It established that KU Leuven's educational policy is in line with its educational vision and addresses current societal challenges. The governance model and policy instruments allow the university to implement its ambitions in general, and to confirm the quality of each accredited programme, in particular. Finally, a strong quality culture is present at all levels of the organization.

The panel comes to this positive conclusion on the basis of its inquiry into the KU Leuven's educational policy. The extensive, candid critical reflection it received prior to the initial site visit allowed the panel to obtain a first, thorough insight into the university's mission, strategy, governance model and policy instruments. On the basis of the dialogue during the exploratory site visit, the panel investigated key aspects further, and narrowed down the in-depth questions to be posed during the second site visit to KU Leuven.

After consultation with the KU Leuven, the panel put forward five topics that it wanted to explore more thoroughly: (1) the governance and allocation model in relation to the interdisciplinary ambitions and managing growth; (2) study progress and completion rate; (3) the valorization of teaching and leadership tasks; (4) the interconnection between formal and informal quality assurance; and (5) COBRA at work at the programme level.

The panel coordinated with KU Leuven over which three programmes were to be selected for the in-depth review trails, so that the panel could see the quality assurance system in operation in various contexts, different faculties and at diverse maturity levels. The following programmes were selected for the review trails: Master of Medicine in Specialist Studies in Medicine, Bachelor of Laws in Laws, and Master of Science in Business Engineering.

The five topics mentioned above formed the common thread through the discussions of the second, in-depth site visit. The dialogues with representatives of all levels of the university took place in an open and reflective atmosphere. This helped the panel to build and focus its judgement about the degree to which the university fulfilled the quality criteria.

The panel found that KU Leuven's vision and strategic goals are future-oriented, representing important challenges for years to come, while also building on continuity. It highly values KU Leuven's strong commitment to education. In line with its ambition to be a pioneer, it sets itself ambitious goals to enhance students' active learning and to improve study progress. The institute's governance model, and the policy instruments it has in place, set the stage for KU Leuven to be able to deliver on its ambitious agenda. KU Leuven's financial strategy ensures that ample resources are available, for the moment, to back policy priorities.

The panel concludes moreover that KU Leuven has everything in place to ensure that the quality of each accredited programme is confirmed in an internationally accepted manner. Systems-based (formal) and people-based (informal) elements of quality assurance are both clearly present, which allows the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)-cycle to run continuously, with the programme committee (POC) and the educational committee at the faculty level (FPOC) serving as the engine, and COBRA¹ serving as a minimal framework.

A strong quality culture needs to be in place for this trust-based system to work. Indeed, the panel found that a consistent and effective quality culture is fully embedded in KU Leuven's nerve system. The panel concludes that subsidiarity, autonomy and accountability really form the backbone of KU Leuven's governance, transcending the status of mere principles. A strong identification with, and high level of commitment to, KU Leuven is present throughout the institution.

¹ COBRA stands for **CO**operation, **R**eflection and **A**ction, with attention paid to **C**hecks & **B**alances.

In addition to trust-based elements and quality culture, the necessary checks and balances are also in place. Issues that arise, or points of improvement that are detected, are consistently followed up. The principle of escalation, which is central to educational policy and the quality assurance vision at KU Leuven, is working well, with the feedback loops between the programme, the faculty and central level adequately putting the information on the level where a decision is best taken. The panel values that COBRA is evaluated after each cycle, and then optimized further. It welcomes that a new Educational Quality Assurance Committee has recently been implemented as an extra layer of checks and balances.

In addition to strong points, the panel also identified points for improvement. Against this background, the panel formulates a number of recommendations:

- Continue to monitor the financial situation closely. Ensure that strategic choices are made and strategic resources are prioritized, in order to continue to safeguard high-quality education in an insecure financial environment;
- Assume a leadership role in working together with, and influencing the Flemish government on selected topics, such as 1) financing their tertiary educational institutions in consideration of additional costs associated with growth in student numbers, 2) developing, in collaboration, regulations that allow institutions to match the existing competences and potential of new study entrants with the starting requirements applicable at university level, and 3) ensuring a more healthy work-life balance is possible for medical specialist in training (MST).
- Clarify the interdisciplinary ambitions in education;
- Further remove existing barriers to becoming a more inclusive university;
- Monitor whether the current set-up of the PDCA-cycle leaves enough time for 'acting' and 'doing';
- Close the feedback loop to students.

2 Report of the panel's investigation

2.1. Initial appreciation by the panel

The extensive, candid and critical reflection allowed the panel to obtain a first, thorough insight into the university's mission, strategy, governance model and policy instruments. The university's mission statement is clear, its integrated strategic plan well-thought through. The panel recognizes that the university's strategic goals ('truly international', 'future oriented education', 'going digital', 'interdisciplinarity', 'sustainability', 'inclusive university' and 'lifelong learning') represent important challenges for the coming years. It welcomes that clear policy goals have been formulated and that key performance indicators monitor the degree to which goals are achieved. The panel values highly that KU Leuven has set itself several innovative goals to enhance students' active learning and to reverse the rising drop-out rates of students because of growing and increasingly heterogeneous cohorts of students ('first milestone').

The documentation clearly shows that educational quality is an important parameter at KU Leuven, the university having spent considerable thought on designing an integrated quality culture at all levels. Based on its first impression, the panel found KU Leuven's quality assurance method, COBRA, solid and thorough. It appreciates the ambition of the organization to incorporate COBRA into its daily practices. The panel learned that the system is based on trust, works according to the appreciative approach, and consists of a minimal framework to allow maximal discipline-specific freedom. The POC, which operates at the level of the educational programme, is the pivot in the continuous process of quality development, which is a clear strength. The role of the Student Council seems to be well established, and students are represented and participate in quality development at the programme level and all other levels.

The panel is intrigued by the KU Leuven Learning Lab, which is a forerunner in the field of learning analytics, and their ambition to use the data to provide personalized data-based feedback to students to help them with their performance and progress.

2.2. Exploratory site visit

2.2.1. Dialogue with the institution

Parallel to this first impression, which the panel formed based on the critical self-reflection, several questions emerged that remained unanswered. The panel used the dialogue with the university during the exploratory site visit to complete, focus and/or adjust its impression, where necessary.

KU Leuven organized the exploratory site visit in such a way that the panel had, on the one hand, the opportunity to raise its main questions in Q&A sessions and, on the other hand, was invited to participate in two break-out dialogue discussions. The aim of the latter was to see KU Leuven's collegial decision-making and co-creation at work. The first dialogue revolved around the question of how the Executive Board, in particular the Vice-Rector for Educational Policy, can connect educational policy monitoring and educational quality, or have these grow closer to each other. The central topic of the second dialogue was how the faculty board can support the programme directors in an appreciative manner, to assure that they take care of their programme in a way that is in line with the policy priorities of the faculty and the university.

A first topic that was raised throughout the day by the panel, **was the relationship between the central, the faculty and the programme levels**. After having read the preparatory documents, the responsibilities of the different bodies that monitor the educational quality remained somewhat unclear. The panel explored how these bodies are set up and linked together; who bears the overall responsibility for the quality of each programme; and what happens in case the quality is not up to standard. The panel learned that the primary stakeholders of study programmes (such as teaching staff, students, support staff) are

expected to handle issues when they arise. However, the Education Quality Monitoring Unit (COOK) is responsible for the university-wide management, process supervision and monitoring of internal quality assurance at KU Leuven. It monitors the implementation of COBRA at the programme level in collaboration with the Vice-Rector for Educational Policy. In addition, problems and risks can also be directly signalled to the Vice-Rector for Educational Policy. Finally, starting from the academic year 2021-2022, the university has established an independent Educational Quality Assurance Committee, which will assist the study programmes that are not able to solve their issues through local management.

The panel was curious to learn more about tensions and challenges that arise between the different governance levels. Although the autonomous working of the faculties is well justified and allows for the required flexibility in quality assurance, this may, at the same time, create some barriers to embed agreed university wide policy priorities. In this context, the panel discussed at length how alignment between POC and the faculty level is achieved. It learned that in some faculties (a selection of) programme directors are members of the Faculty Board, while in others, a faculty level POC has been installed where all programme POCs are represented. The Vice-Dean for Educational Policy, as a member of the Faculty Board and as chair of the faculty level POC, is an important liaison, thus ensuring that the two levels are linked. However, it was also noted that in some faculties, more work needs to be done to link faculty and programme ambitions and priorities better.

Having seen that the POCs play a pivotal role in the quality assurance level, the panel was curious to learn more about how POCs can make necessary changes to programmes or acquire necessary staff, if finances are controlled and competed for elsewhere (i.e. at the faculty or departmental level). It was explained that although faculties and departments have more 'hard' power, POCs and programme directors do have a lot of 'soft' power. However, soft power is not always visible and explicit, leading to various degrees of ownership. Linked to that is the fact that it is not always clear to the members of the POCs what their function and authority is, what they can decide on and what lies within their advisory capacity.

A second topic the panel explored was the university's objective to **strengthen collaboration across faculties and departments**, so that research and education become more **interdisciplinary**. The panel learned that until recently, faculties functioned mostly as silos, working to a large degree in isolation. Nevertheless, the KU Leuven has been working hard over the last seven to eight years to create more interconnection. Different groups of interviewees explained that, indeed, borders between faculties are frequently crossed, both in a formal and informal way. On top of the monthly meetings of the Educational Council, there are bimonthly gatherings of the Vice-Deans for Educational Policy. Furthermore, quality assurance support staff collaborate across faculties. The KU Leuven Learning Lab is another example of a context in which exchange happens continuously. Importantly, KU Leuven institutes have been installed across the classical faculty borders. Examples are the Brain Institute (LBI), the Institute for Artificial Intelligence (Leuven.AI), the Plan Institute (LPI) and the Urban Studies Institute (LUSI). Experts from different disciplines are brought together in these institutes for both research and educational purposes. This has led to cross-disciplinary programmes at the Master and PhD level.

How the external point of view is brought in at different levels of the organization was the third main topic discussed throughout the day. The panel learned that bringing in an external point of view, at the programme level, is a strict requirement in the COBRA cycle. Programmes have a high degree of freedom in deciding how they want to bring in this external input. COOK monitors the choices made for each programme, discusses the findings with the faculty and programme stakeholders, and reports its findings to the Vice-Dean for Educational Policy. At the central level, the newly established Educational Quality Assurance Committee has two external members, while the Educational Council invites external advisors on specific topics on a regular basis.

The panel used the conversations to explore a fourth topic: the degree to which the **quality culture at the KU Leuven** is really embedded. The panel greatly appreciated the open discussions and the fact that interviewees were candid about the tensions that arise, for example between trust and compliance. During the breakout dialogue sessions, the panel observed how the dialogue methodology is a crucial element of the continuous cycle of quality development. The panel also discussed the quality culture model that has been developed at the KU Leuven, with formal-structural elements, like the PDCA-cycle, on the one hand and on the other hand, group-dynamic and connecting elements. The panel observed that this model resonates with how the academic community perceives quality culture, with the pillars of the model functioning as potential levers for quality culture.

A fifth topic the panel focused on is **whether the quality assurance model is feasible in terms of workload**. The academic staff expressed their appreciation of the level and quality of support they receive. There has been a substantial investment in educational support staff, and faculties have also been incentivized to invest in the size and quality of support staff, rather than expanding the academic staff. The challenge now is to bring the support to the individual faculty members, which is what is needed to make the transition fully to active learning. The panel appreciated the plan to create micro support via a networking structure as close as possible to faculty needs and individual staff.

Sixth, and related to this, the panel explored **how teaching, leadership and administrative tasks are valued in the promotion policy**. There was agreement that although education has become more important, steps still need to be taken to put it at the same level as research in the evaluation for promotion. Student representatives explained that they have seen an evolution and that this topic is now more firmly on the agenda than before.

A seventh topic the panel addressed was the **growth of student numbers** in an educational system with free access to higher education, and the pressure this potentially puts on staff and infrastructure. The panel received a first insight in how the Flemish allocation system works. It also explored KU Leuven's plans to focus on **student progress**, as improving this is crucial in keeping the current system viable. The panel learned that the KU Leuven expects the 'first milestone' initiative to lead to an increase from 30% of students, who currently obtain all credits, to 42-45% of students achieving a 100% study success rate with or without deliberation after their first academic year, based on current predictive models. This would mean that a substantially larger portion of students will stay in their starting cohort.

Finally, the panel was interested in how **equity, diversity and inclusion** issues are handled. The panel welcomed that 'inclusive university' has been added as a strategic objective, as this is crucial to safeguard the university's viability. Nevertheless, the panel noticed that the student representation during the exploratory site visit was not diverse. The panel learned that the Student Council has an equal representation of male and female students at the university level, and that in general, ensuring more diverse student representation is a priority in all dimensions, including gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ and socio-economic. Also, KU Leuven gave insight into its long trajectory of providing equal opportunities to students with disabilities.

2.2.2. Assessment proposal for in-depth dialogue

The dialogue during the exploratory site visit enabled the panel to continue its evaluation of KU Leuven. It also allowed the panel to narrow down the in-depth questions for the second site visit. The table below lists the topics proposed by the panel, after consultation with the institutional management. The list indicates, for each topic, at which organizational level the panel wished to focus the discussion. For each topic, the primary level that the panel wished to focus on is indicated by v, whereas (v) indicates that questions related to this topic could arise during the meetings in the review trails.

	Central	Faculty	Programme
Topic 1 Governance and allocation model in relation to the interdisciplinary ambitions and managing the growth of the university.	v	(v)	(v)
Topic 2 Study progress and completion rate.	v	v	v
Topic 3 Valorization of teaching and leadership tasks in the university.	v	(v)	(v)
Topic 4 Interconnection between formal and informal quality assurance.	v	v	v
Topic 5 COBRA at work at the programme level.	(v)	(v)	v

It was also agreed with KU Leuven that it would provide the panel with the following documentation in preparation for the in-depth site visit:

- Overview of how the external view comes in at every level of reviewing the quality process + how external peers are selected;
- Financing system, rate of growth in student numbers, completion rates of students;
- Support staff overview- support staff to teacher ratio – with an indication of what responsibility is given to support staff;
- Levers for diverse student representation;
- More detailed information on systems-based versus people-based elements of the quality model; Interconnection between Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle and culture – what checks and balances are in place?

The panel coordinated with KU Leuven over which three programmes were to be selected for the in-depth review trails, so that the panel could see the quality assurance system in operation in various contexts, different faculties and at diverse maturity levels. The following programmes were selected for the review trails:

- Faculty of Medicine (Biomedical Sciences Group): Master of Medicine in Specialist Studies in Medicine
- Faculty of Law and Criminology (Humanities and Social Sciences Group): Bachelor of Laws
- Faculty of Economics and Business (Humanities and Social Sciences Group): Master of Business Engineering

2.3. In-depth site visit

The panel reports on its considerations and findings based on the second site visit below. This visit allowed the panel to have in-depth dialogues with representatives from the institutional, faculty and programme levels. KU Leuven added high-quality materials to the overarching critical reflection, which allowed the panel to gain a more thorough insight into each of the focal topics. The panel moreover received, for each of the programmes included in the trails, an overview of the education dashboard and the box plots of the student evaluations. Links were provided to the blueprints of every programme and the quality reports that were composed at the end of the 2015-2019 COBRA cycle.

2.3.1. Report of the panel's inquiry Management of student growth

The dialogues during the site visit enabled the panel to gain a more complete insight into KU Leuven's governance structure and its allocation model. The panel wished to learn about the discretion that the institution has to implement its vision and strategic lines on the one hand, and to ensure the quality of education on the other. Among other things, the panel wanted to

learn how the growth in student numbers was managed. The panel gained insight into the different revenue streams of KU Leuven, the mechanisms behind the institutional block grant (first flow public funding), and the set-up of the internal allocation model. It learned that in a context where access to university is essentially open to all students with a diploma of secondary education, government funding does not always follow student growth. The click mechanism that is meant to be activated as soon as the student numbers of an institution grow by 2%, has not been applied on several occasions in the past years due to budget cuts, leading to a considerable loss in revenues on each occasion (€6 million per missed click).

KU Leuven showed the panel that adequate strategies have been developed to manage this situation and to continue providing quality education. On the one hand, KU Leuven has revenues that can make up for part of the loss. It has a strong position in research income, the overhead of which contributes to the budget of the institute's basic structures; it has a considerable financial income from its investment portfolio; the tuition fees have recently been raised; and the ambition is to attract more students from outside the European Economic Area, who pay higher tuition fees. On the other hand, KU Leuven is deploying strategies to cope with the low on-time completion rate, with the first milestone project as the most eye-catching measure. Other initiatives include recent investments in growth in the number of professors, in support staff, and in infrastructure.

Although the panel is convinced that KU Leuven can manage growth in student numbers in the short term, it wishes to emphasize that accumulated longer term issues may arise due to the misfiring click mechanism. This trend, if continued over the longer term, exposes the university to clear risks ('boiling frog syndrome'), as it may divert resources from other essential areas. Navigating the current financial system will require strategic choices and prioritization of resources. The panel agrees with KU Leuven that it is imperative to work together with, and to influence, the Flemish government to evolve towards regulations that allow institutions to match the existing competences and potential of new study entrants with the starting requirements applicable at university level. Also, the funding system should be in line with the entry requirements: if the government continues with the 'open intake' approach, then a (semi-) open funding system that keeps resources in line with further growth of the student population is essential. The panel encourages KU Leuven to continue to assume a leadership role in this respect.

Incentives for interdisciplinarity

As working towards more interdisciplinarity is one of KU Leuven's strategic priorities, the panel also focused on how incentives are created to work in increasingly interdisciplinary ways, and particularly across existing faculty boundaries. The panel learned that several elements are in place in the allocation model to stimulate interdisciplinarity within education. First, the input of other disciplines in programmes is stimulated by allocating additional means to the group and faculty that organize the course. The teaching responsibility stays with the group/the faculty of the subject area of the course, yet the embedding in the study programme is the responsibility of the POC and falls under the responsibility of the host faculty. Second, KU Leuven has set up various joint study programmes (e.g. European studies; Economics, Law and Business Administration; Nanoscience and Nanotechnology; Sports Ethics and Integrity) across faculties and groups. All partners in these programmes are evenly funded in the internal allocation model. Third, the opportunity has existed, since 2019, for faculties and groups to appoint joint professors if both entities involved have the ambition to collaborate in an interdisciplinary way. Currently, eighteen such appointments are in place. Finally, and also since 2019, interdisciplinary networks or centers have received the opportunity to obtain formal acknowledgement, within the KU Leuven governance structure, as an interdisciplinary institute. Although their primary focus is research, KU Leuven explained that due to the cross-pollination between teaching and research, these networks are seen to stimulate interdisciplinarity within current and future study programmes.

The trails provided to the panel exhibited several examples of the current implementation of the institution's interdisciplinary ambition. Representatives from the Business Engineering programme pointed out that many different disciplines are included in the programme; the Bachelor of Laws representatives mentioned the availability of many non-legal courses, and the options of 'Political Sciences', 'Economics, Law and Business Studies', 'Criminology', and 'Japanese Studies' offered, alongside a general option. The Master of Specialist Studies in Medicine offers students the possibility to either deepen or broaden their knowledge in their elective space, the latter with the aim to allow them to explore other disciplines. The panel was particularly impressed by the 'Biomedical Actors of the Future' project, which has laid the groundwork for future interdisciplinary programmes (e.g. a postgraduate programme for biomedical technology). It was also impressed by the multidisciplinary simulation practices that have been developed, where students who specialize in gynaecology collaborate with midwives-in-training from the university colleges of the KU Leuven Association. The panel feels that developing this kind of future-oriented, interprofessional training further should be a high priority at KU Leuven.

The panel welcomes that working across the boundaries of disciplines is promoted broadly. Still, it also observed that while some initiatives seem to aim at true interdisciplinarity (different disciplinary approaches to a common question), others are more geared towards multi-disciplinarity (offer of courses outside the main focus of the programme). The panel feels there is a need to clarify where exactly KU Leuven's interdisciplinary ambitions lie, to translate what this may mean on the educational level, and to specify what exactly is needed to get there.

In this sense, the panel was pleased to hear that the Educational Council is currently debating how to bring more interdisciplinarity into bachelor's programmes via heat maps, in that this exercise is creating awareness and overview. It also learned that KU Leuven Engage provides opportunities to include so-called 'wicked problems' in the curricula, which will develop their interdisciplinary orientation further. The panel welcomes that KU Leuven is investing in programmes that link multiple disciplines, like the Bachelor of Arts in European Studies, and suggests that KU Leuven should continue this course of action.

Measures to support improved study progress – the first milestone

The panel explored in depth, the policy preparation, implementation and monitoring of measures to support an improved study progress, focussing first on the first milestone project. It learned that students are expected to reach their first milestone after one year, which means that they pass all courses or have received credit for them by the exam committee. Students who fail to do so are given the opportunity to resit courses. As a rule, the first milestone must be reached by students after two years, in order for them to be allowed to continue their study programme. Student and staff representatives agreed that the first milestone system is more transparent than the previous system that was based on a cumulative study progress requirement of 50%. The 30% rule, which stipulates that after one year, students must have acquired at least 30% of the credits they have taken up, is continued within the milestone system as students, who fall below this threshold, have almost no chance to succeed in obtaining a degree.

The panel highly values KU Leuven's attention to core education themes of growth, progression and completion. It welcomes that emphasis is put on the first year, as this is often a highly challenging phase for students. From a quality perspective, it makes sense to intervene as early as possible: students who are still fighting to pass early years of their bachelor studies in the fourth or fifth year of their time at university use up resources that could be invested in other students, who would benefit more from guidance and coaching. It is also negative for individuals, who may be thought to waste precious early years without progressing in a constructive way.

KU Leuven is putting a lot of effort into improving student guidance alongside the implementation of the first milestone. Dedicated dashboards have been developed for the students, with the aim of helping them interpret where they stand in their study progress, how this relates to other students' results, and what this means for their chances of passing the first milestone.

The emphasis on the dashboards in the discussions triggered the panel to inquire whether and how, in addition to the dashboards, a human element of student guidance is to be implemented. The dialogues showed that the panel's concern to monitor the balance between the number-based (emphasis on tools and dashboard) and people-based guidance is shared within the organization. Students told the panel that they have been closely involved and felt heard in their emphasis on the need to stress the human component. The leadership of the Faculty of Law and Criminology illustrated how the iterative process of the development of the first milestone had allowed for their concerns to be taken into account. The panel also learned that the KU Leuven's student services (Stuvo) has created an elaborate context of guidance around the dashboards, with explanations, online learning trajectories and dedicated counselling. The latter is organized by all first year programmes and is strongly recommended for individual students, who do not pass the first milestone after the first year. The panel was pleased to hear that student services are in the process of moving closer to the programmes and faculties to lower the contact threshold for students. The panel also learned, during the trails, that some faculties take additional measures to ensure for as many students as possible to have access to personal guidance. The Faculty of Law and Criminology has invested in an extra coach, paid from its own financial reserves, to guide its bachelor students even better.

Although the panel clearly noted that personal guidance in the implementation of the first milestone is a high priority, it has some residual concern about the comparative element of the dashboards and the effects this might have on students. The panel recommends that KU Leuven monitors and evaluates closely whether the system may be pushing students out of the system who have the capacity to pick up later, but may need more time to adjust to the academic environment. In this sense, the panel was pleased to see that monitoring and evaluation are already ongoing, and that the impact of the first milestone and the implementation of the dashboards on students with various diversity characteristics, is one of the elements that are followed up closely.

The panel appreciates that KU Leuven is developing an integrated approach of measures regarding progression and completion across the full scope of the student journey. It learned that orientation and reorientation of students is also firmly on the radar, and that for the latter, KU Leuven wants to make full use of the 'network of opportunities' that the KU Leuven Association offers, with the intention to remove barriers for reorientation as much as possible. This collaboration within KU Leuven Association is clearly a strength, and deserves to be continued and strengthened.

Measures to support improved study progress – active learning

Another prominent element to support study progress is active learning, the implementation of which the panel explored during the review trails. Although the programmes selected by the panel for the trails differed widely, it found that enhancing active learning was a priority for each one, with several ambitious new projects in the pipeline. The Faculty of Law and Criminology, for example, is taking steps to reconcile the reality of large groups with the ambition to have an individualized approach and maximum involvement of students. On top of a long-standing tradition of mentoring, flipped classroom methodologies are used to allow more room for application of knowledge by, and feedback to, students. The Faculty of Economics and Business is developing and testing methods to engage in group work with large groups. The panel was impressed by the Faculty of Medicine's projects that will intensify the use of simulation technologies (AR and VR) in its education, and values that it is doing so in close collaboration with other faculties, and together with the university colleges.

Faculty and programme representatives were open about the significant initial concern about the feasibility of the implementation of active learning in terms of workload, especially in programmes with large student numbers. Representatives from the Faculty of Arts, however, explained that they were able to voice these concerns, and that additional investments were made. In this faculty, 7 FTE support staff were attributed as closely as possible to the programmes, with one staff member from every POC to support them. All staff members can moreover rely on 'microsupport' from the KU Leuven Learning Lab, and programmes can apply for project-based funding. The panel noted that 130 new professors have been appointed across the university since 2013, almost matched 1:1 by support staff, which the panel rated as impressive. The panel got the impression from the dialogues that faculty and support staff work side by side to implement the educational shift that the KU Leuven aspires to. In also stimulating exchange of expertise through networks across the university, KU Leuven seems to be succeeding in creating an effective learning organization.

COBRA at work

The three review trails provided the panel with the opportunity to see the quality assurance system of the KU Leuven (COBRA) at work. The preparatory documents provided a more detailed insight into the vision behind COBRA, on the one hand, and the specific set-up of the four-year cycle at the programme level, on the other hand.

In its vision, KU Leuven places the responsibility for educational quality assurance as close as possible on actors who are directly involved. They are given the responsibility and trust to manage the educational quality assurance, to coordinate it within the larger body of policy choices and to assess the educational quality they have implemented themselves. The concept of quality culture is central in this vision. According to KU Leuven, the performance of the institution depends on the level of interaction between systems-based and people-based elements. COBRA is the quality assurance method within this framework. It provides structure for the continuous quality assurance at the different levels of governance, in a four-year quality assurance cycle, which consists of two component cycles of two years each. A minimal framework of university-wide agreements makes the quality assurance method specific to each level of governance (programme – faculty – institute).

At the programme level, COBRA stipulates that two documents act as a point of reference both for the continuous development of the curriculum and for the quality assurance cycle. Firstly, the profile and vision of a programme are to be described in a blueprint. Secondly, a programme action plan indicates how the programme continuously evaluates and improves its educational quality. During the four-year cycle, the POC is expected to gather information on educational quality from many different quantitative and qualitative sources. These include the results of student evaluations of teaching, of a programme evaluation, of education dashboards, of a risk screening, and of programme discussions with students, assisting teaching staff and faculty staff members. The POC discusses the educational quality of each study programme continuously, based on all this information, with the blueprint as a frame of reference.

The POC reviews the state of play on the progress of the programme action in the middle of the four-year cycle, whereas at the end of the cycle, each programme draws up a summary of all assessment activities for all study programmes, based on the topics of their choice, and writes a publicly available COBRA-report for each study programme. The POC must ensure that the statements from the evaluation are transparent, verifiable and traceable. The panel also took note of the fact that all POC documents necessary for, and resulting from, the reflection are made available on the COBRA SharePoint site.

The panel learned that KU Leuven has chosen not to make into individual items the eight quality characteristics that each programme needs to comply with, according to the decree on the quality assurance system in higher education (2018). Rather, they are integrated in the

COBRA framework, e.g. through the topics covered in the blueprint, action plan and evaluations tools, or by means of the requirement to involve peers in the process. An extensive portal page brings together the existing support and assessment materials on the eight characteristics.

Each POC determines how they want to implement these university-wide agreements in their own quality culture, in line with KU Leuven's vision. The panel appreciates that, in addition to the central role of subsidiarity and quality culture, an extra layer of checks and balances is in place to ensure that COBRA is implemented at other levels of governance, in such a way that the quality of every single programme is guaranteed. Importantly, a faculty scenario shows each programme's specific implementation of the quality assurance method in a transparent way. The scenario not only manages the internal organization of COBRA in each POC and faculty, it also forms a way of communicating with COOK on the monitoring of the quality culture and the accountability towards external parties. Its implementation is monitored by COOK both in the middle (interim follow-up conversations) and at the end (desk research) of the cycle.

One example of desk research that was carried out by COOK was a meta-analysis of the presence of the eight quality characteristics in the quality assurance activities of the programmes. COOK mapped out to which extent the quality characteristics were represented in the self-assessment reports of the POC and in the programme action plans within COBRA (during the 2017-2019 component cycle). This revealed that some quality characteristics were addressed in more detail than others across the university. The panel took note that this has led to initiatives to improve a more specific focus on quality.

The panel observed that the faculties and programmes selected for the review trails align their quality control processes and mechanisms to the requirements of the COBRA method and cycle. At the same time, programmes seem to be using the freedom to tailor COBRA to their specific needs and quality culture. For example, COBRA exists alongside an external accreditation system, EQUIS² in the Faculty of Economics and Business. The Faculty of Medicine has added extra tools to evaluate the clinical learning environment of hospitals. The review trails revealed to the panel that the academic leadership at the faculty and programme level show a strong engagement in, and ownership of, quality control and development.

It also became clear to the panel that both formal and informal elements of quality management have been given sufficient attention in the faculties and programmes of the review trails, with systems-based and people-based elements going hand in hand. The PDCA-cycle seems to be running well, with the POC at the programme and faculty level serving as the engine. In addition to formal tools and structures, the panel found clear evidence that the concept of quality culture that is part of KU Leuven's vision, is visibly present. An open-door policy, with close connections between the POC directors, the (vice-)deans and student representatives, allows for problems to be discussed as soon as they arise, even in between POC meetings. The panel talked on several occasions to student representatives, all of which consistently confirmed the image of them working as a team together with programme and faculty management. The same holds true for education experts and support staff, who gave examples of how issues that spring up are dealt with, demonstrating an orientation towards continuous improvement. The panel found clear evidence of the fact that potential issues are dealt with both proactively and retroactively.

Nonetheless, the well-thought through, and rather elaborate system also comes with some challenges. First, the interviews revealed that the tools and instruments offered within COBRA provide an enormous amount of valuable data but that the quality assurance model

² EQUIS accreditation is an internationally recognized institutional accreditation system for business and management schools.

requires a high frequency of conversion. The panel learned from programme and faculty representatives that the challenge is sometimes to find the time to reflect on what actions to prioritize, and then to arrange the time to act according to the decisions made. The panel encourages KU Leuven to give sufficient attention to both of these crucial elements of the PDCA-cycle. This is especially important in a context where there are many priorities, and choices need to be made in order to continue to safeguard the quality of education.

A second issue that consistently sprung up during the dialogues is student feedback culture. Many student surveys are conducted, yet students do not always hear about the results, which may also contribute to maintaining a suitable response rate to the surveys. The panel is of the opinion that feedback loops need to be incorporated more persistently, pointing students to what has been changed in the system following their feedback. Although many approaches to the complex issues have been tried, and although the covid pandemic has imposed some limits, the panel recommends that the coherence and communications are improved through involving a wider range of students beyond the student representatives.

Involvement of external peers

The panel explored to what extent independent external peers and experts are required to be brought into the quality assurance process as an extra check on the implementation of COBRA. It learned that although the involvement of external stakeholders and peers was formulated less stringently in the initial phase of the 2015-2019 COBRA-cycle, a university-wide framework was set for the second half (2017-2019), most of which still applies today. The framework now stipulates that each category of external representatives must be involved in the process (i.e. alumni, the professional field *and* (international) peers). Also, the peers need to be (international) discipline experts not connected to the programme. Finally, all these external stakeholder categories participate in a self-assessment organized by the POC.

True to the subsidiarity principle, the implementation can be tailored to the needs of each programme. Programmes indicate how they deal with the external parties' involvement in the faculty script for quality assurance, which is discussed every two years with COOK, as part of the monitoring process. COOK did additional desk research to provide an extra layer of monitoring at the end of the 2015-2019 cycle, which revealed that almost all programmes involve alumni (97%), the professional field (96%) and external peers (96%). The programmes that had not done so, were to be monitored closely in the 2019-2023 cycle.

The panel was pleased to learn that the experiences in the first COBRA-cycle also led to an update of the requirements in the 2019-2023 cycle. Programmes now have more freedom in deciding on the timing of the involvement of external peers, and that it should be organized at least once in a four-year cycle. However, at the time of the site visit, the faculties were still working on their plans to involve external stakeholders and peers for the current COBRA cycle (2019-2023). The panel learned that some faculties use an external accreditation organization like EQUIS. Also, specific attention is often given at the faculty level to the selection criteria for independent peers. Often, the proposal for peers to be involved needs to be ratified by the Faculty Board or the Faculty Council.

The dialogues during the review trails confirmed that the programmes and faculties do include the opinion of independent peers in the quality control cycle. The Faculty of Medicine, for example, explained that dialogues with alumni, the professional fields and with independent academic peers are scheduled in December 2022 as part of the COBRA cycle. Another example comes from the Faculty of Economics and Business, where the EQUIS procedure assures that independent peers are involved. The discussions with the representatives from the Faculty of Law and Criminology revealed that careful consideration is given so that the selected peers can provide a critical and independent point of view. The faculty monitors the selected external stakeholders to ensure that they do not depend on the faculty or institution for their income, and noted that independence is also reflected in the

wide range of perspectives that are gathered. The panel also observed that the existing quality culture makes it imperative to select high-quality peers. Representatives from faculties and programmes, moreover, explained that the input of stakeholders is also requested informally on various topics.

The panel concludes that all faculties and programmes from the review trail sufficiently include the external view. The panel's inquiry into the involvement of external peers provided an extra check as to the degree to which KU Leuven, through its quality assurance policy and the way it is implemented, safeguards and confirms the quality of each accredited programme. It found that the minimal guidelines cover the assurance and development of the quality features that are internationally expected of higher education institutions, and that a variety of quality assurance activities are deployed. On the one hand, quality culture and the subsidiarity principle allow faculties and programmes to make their own choices and take ownership of the quality assurance process. On the other hand, KU Leuven oversees the process with appropriate checks and balances.

Governance model – bottom-up versus top-down

The discussions with different levels of the organization allowed the panel to sharpen its insight into KU Leuven's governance, more specifically into the bottom-up and top-down dynamics of educational policy implementation on the one hand, and quality assurance of the educational programmes on the other.

As regards the implementation of educational policy, the discussions on active learning and the first milestone showed the panel that significant institutional-wide policies that are formally decided 'top-down' are evidence-based and adopted after wide consultation. The panel repeatedly observed that there is an openness at the central level for good ideas from bottom-up. Student representatives, as well as staff members, repeatedly mentioned that they are listened to and cited evidence for their views.

Indeed, the panel found that the principle of escalation and wider implementation, which is central to the educational policy and quality control vision of KU Leuven, is working well in practice. In all three review trails, the panel noted that the feedback loops between programme and faculty level appear to be working well. Issues from the POC are discussed at the Faculty POC, and sometimes the Faculty Board. The panel observed that programmes and faculties are always looking for the best level to resolve the issue that is on the table. When a certain point requires action at the faculty rather than the programme level, it is escalated. For example, when master thesis guidance surfaced as an issue requiring more attention in one of the POCs from the Faculty of Economics and Business, it was decided to make it a faculty-wide effort, as the importance of its application across the whole faculty was recognized.

Within the COBRA-cycle, every faculty is expected to escalate the topics it thinks should receive priority. The Educational Council is then the forum where action points are selected, for approval by the Executive Board and Academic Council before being brought back to faculties, programmes, students and staff. The panel was pleased to hear that a focus on curriculum design, on post-covid digital education and on COBRA cycle requirements were the topics implemented more widely in the latest cycle, with preparations to implement these priorities further now in full swing.

The panel also found that once a decision had been made, the implementation is backed up with adequate resources. Faculty and programme representatives candidly explained to the panel that not every strategic objective is equally relevant for every faculty, yet that there is enough flexibility to allow 'local' variations to exist. This flexibility seems to stimulate the policy making capacity at the faculty level, with faculties eager to implement the policy in a way that fits the local needs. The panel felt that there was ownership of centrally decided

policies in the discussions, which would provide an excellent basis for implementation in practice.

The panel also zoomed in on how KU Leuven makes a formal decision on whether the quality delivered in each educational programme meets the quality standards. It noted that KU Leuven primarily delegates this responsibility to the study programmes, with issues that cannot be dealt with on the programme level, being escalated to the faculty level, and, if necessary, to the central management. Importantly, potential issues and risks can also be flagged immediately to the central management, without having to follow the escalation procedure.

University management commented that issues often have no need to be brought to the central management, as they have been dealt with at the programme or faculty level. Deans and programme directors explained that the dashboards that they have at their disposal continually help them to flag potential issues, and to deal with them swiftly. The panel was told that autonomy, subsidiarity and accountability are key elements to ensure that issues are dealt with as early, and as soon, as possible. University management was open about the fact that the accountability element requires further strengthening, and that further developing leadership at all governance levels is key to achieve that.

As explained above, the continuous monitoring by COOK of the implementation of minimal requirements of COBRA, is added as a necessary extra check and balance, allowing for potential issues and risks to be flagged following this route. Potential 'breaches' will always lead to conversations at the programme level, first. Only if a programme does not succeed in mitigating an identified risk, is the case brought to the next level.

The panel further explored what happens with issues and risks once they reach the level of central management. It learned that while issues were until recently brought to the Vice Rector for Educational Policy, the university has decided to establish an independent Educational Quality Assurance Committee that assists the Executive Board in assuring a programme's quality of education, in the case that a clear quality assurance risk is identified. More specifically, this committee will have four tasks: (1) it will be a reporting centre for everyone involved in (the monitoring of) the assurance of the quality of education; (2) it will assess the severity of the risks that were signalled; (3) it will look, in consultation with the study programme, for an appropriate solution and will determine a timeframe for the remedial measures; and (4) when the study programme does not make any improvements, the committee transfers persistent issues to the Executive Board. In that case, the committee formulates strict advice. The Board of Governors can propose follow-up measures or, as a last resort, discontinue the study programme. The committee consists of eight internal members and two independent, external peers.

Finally, the panel was pleased to see that the need for cross-campus calibration of quality assurance and development is clearly on the radar. For example, the panel learned that the Faculty of Economics and Business streamlines its quality assurance by means of cross-campus POCs. In the Faculty of Law and Criminology, campuses have a local POC (known as OC), headed by the Campus Dean, and coordinated in a cross-campus POC. Moreover, the Campus Deans are part of the Faculty Board. Additionally, staff meetings are held every two weeks by the Vice-Dean for everyone involved in education policy.

Valorization of teaching and leadership tasks

The degree to which vision and strategic lines are implemented, depends on people as much as on structures and systems. This is why the panel also explored the valorization of teaching and leadership tasks, focusing on career progression on the one hand, and career support measures on the other. From the preparatory documents, the panel learned that KU Leuven has established a clear academic career path. It observed that KU Leuven's selection and promotion procedures take into account the variety of activities that professors deploy, and that contributions to education, engagement, leadership and collaboration receive recognition along with research. The panel values highly that emphasis is put on quality over quantity. The ambition to emphasize quality has been operationalized by means of the biosketch, which has been added to the assessment process since 2018 for the selection process and since 2020 for the promotion process. The biosketch aims to complement the available data and metrics by enquiring about the five main achievements of each applicant.

The panel zoomed in on the way quality of education is taken into consideration in career progression. It gained more insight into the practice of developing and using the teaching portfolio, which was introduced in 2014-2015 as a tool for strengthening the conversation on education and working on the further appreciation for education and the valorization of teaching duties and academic assignments for the relevant staff members. The staff member describes and reflects on his/her educational efforts and realizations in the teaching portfolio, and indicates growth and/or evolution. The staff member then discusses the teaching portfolio with a peer review committee consisting of colleagues from their own academic group, complemented by a member from a different academic group. Importantly, the staff member has the opportunity to ask specific questions to the peer review committee. This committee expresses its appreciation for strong elements and creates opportunities for optimization and progress. They also formulate a final decision that reflects the committee's appreciation for the teaching efforts and achievements made by the staff member. The teaching portfolio, and the committee's final decision, are part of the promotion file. The teaching portfolio is currently mandatory for promotions from assistant to associate professor, and for the first promotion of each member of the independent academic staff (ZAP) recruited into a higher rank with an assignment of at least 80% at KU Leuven and/or UZ Leuven. It is optional for all other ZAP-members.

The panel considers the teaching portfolio as a positive evolution. The fact that it is peer-reviewed by a committee, with whom the evaluated staff member can interact, is considered to be good practice. The panel also learned that the implementation of the portfolio is currently being revised. It welcomes the first plans of the steering committee on Academic Careers to include it structurally in the evaluation process, in making it part of the bio-sketch and obligatory for review every five years.

The panel moreover learned that KU Leuven offers a broad range of career support measures. It was pleased to see that thorough policy instruments have been developed to improve leadership at various levels, and for different categories of staff. On a personal level, coaching, development interviews, and self-reflection tools allow staff to reflect on their career goals more consciously, considering both their individual needs and the objectives of their faculty or department. With its Life@Work initiatives, KU Leuven wants to help its staff to find and maintain a good balance between work and other areas of their life. A leadership programme is in place, mixing both academic and non-academic leaders, supporting them in

leading teams into change, and allowing them to reflect and exchange in networks on their new leadership role. In addition, postdocs are offered training in leading a research team, and newly appointed professors are required to follow, and engage actively in, a PhD supervision course (I-supervise). As regards educational professional development, the KU Leuven Learning Lab Academy offers a wide range of training sessions and workshops. During the tenure track, new professors are expected to undertake extensive didactical training, which automatically leads to the university Teaching Qualification (Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs, BKO), when obtaining a positive result for the evaluation of the teaching portfolio through peer review. The teaching portfolio can then be shown to support teaching staff in their professional development.

The panel noted that newly appointed staff receive educational and supervision training, and staff members, who apply for promotion, are required to hand in a teaching portfolio. Although this approach assures that a majority of staff receive the necessary support and training, the panel voiced its concern that a critical and potentially resistant and senior group of staff members may currently be excluded, or indeed, exclude themselves. Although the panel learned that this group is small and getting smaller, it suggests that the situation should be monitored closely, and ways found to improve and enhance involvement.

In learning more about the organizational structure of KU Leuven during the site visit, it struck the panel that the multicampus and multilayered governance model requires many people to step up into a leadership role. The panel discussed the issue of finding sufficient people willing to engage at the university, faculty, and programme level. The institutional management was open about the fact that this is sometimes a challenge, and that filling some roles poses more of a challenge than others (e.g. leadership at the departmental level).

The panel observed that several good practices are in place to incentivize staff. Representatives from management at the faculty level explained that it is important that deans provide transparency around taking up responsibilities in the organization as a requirement for academic staff. Also, offering support in long-term planning of when to take up which role/function, was mentioned as being key by some of the deans the panel spoke to. The panel values that (vice-)deans and also programme directors (in some programmes) are allocated a decreased teaching assignment while in office, and that staff members are entitled to a sabbatical after having taken up senior leadership roles.

During the trails, the panel observed that in practice, follow-up in leadership is not perceived to be an issue, with representatives mentioning that people pop-up in time for roles. The perception in the programmes and faculties the panel spoke to seems to be that, indeed, many people need to step up, but this also means that ownership and involvement is distributed across the organization. The panel agrees that this fits well with KU Leuven's quality culture model. Interviewees moreover explained that different roles have a different granularity. Colleagues often start with roles with limited scope and responsibility, and grow towards roles that function at a higher governance scale. The panel suggests that this talent pipeline should continue to be nurtured, ensuring that staff members are able to enhance their competences, by means of training, mentoring and coaching, while absorbing information and experience and developing institutional memory, as they grow into more complex governance roles.

Diversity

The panel explored how the ambition to become a more inclusive university is put into practice. It was pleased to learn that appropriate equal opportunities regulations are in place. A governance structure has been set up with faculty diversity teams, and a Diversity Council is overlooking the implementation of the policy framework.

The panel observed that the current career progression policy and leadership development at KU Leuven supports and stimulates diversity. As regards gender, search committees for new

staff have the responsibility to identify and attract female candidates. The panel appreciates that this policy has started to bear fruit. Currently, the percentage of female candidates for ZAP positions is about 30%, which is also the case at the higher academic levels. This share is around 40% in the pool of newly recruited professors, whereas, the share of women among the newly recruited professors was 57% in the Biomedical Sciences Group in the current academic year. This percentage is significantly lower in STEM-oriented faculties, lying currently at 23%. The equal opportunities regulations also stipulate that the percentage of women promoted is at least the same as the women applying for promotion. On the one hand, the bio-sketch was introduced to embrace diversity in career paths and to emphasize quality over quantity in promotion procedures, which is known to impact the chances for promotions of female professors in a positive way. On the other hand, it demands that individuals should present their achievements, clearly and robustly. The panel felt that some gender bias could manifest itself in the process and advised KU Leuven to monitor this.

The panel learned that for leadership roles, there is a clear tendency towards equal representation, yet that men are still over-represented in election-based mandates. This means that in the most prestigious roles and elected leadership positions, the successful candidates are mainly male. The panel is of the opinion that further system changes may be required to tackle this issue.

Although KU Leuven has invested in unconscious bias training of its selection and promotion committees, the panel recommends that the university continues to look for ways to deal with elements of diversity that may not be covered sufficiently by the current training units. It also sees a need to add or complement diversity dimensions, such as ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ and socio-economic perspectives.

The panel also explored the diversity policies related to students. Declaring the aim of recruiting a more diverse population of students, KU Leuven has set up strategic partnerships with a range of socio-cultural partners. Numbers on student recruitment and progress are analyzed in its yearly monitoring from a diversity perspective. The panel learned that it is the ambition to be as inclusive as possible in all services that are offered. As mentioned above, student services are moving towards a more decentralized model where multidisciplinary teams are moving to the faculties in order to provide a single-entry-point for students with questions. This will also mean that student services can gear their services more to the specific needs and characteristics of students on the different KU Leuven campuses. One such example is the Brussels campus, which has a more diverse student population. The panel was pleased to learn that KU Leuven also has tracks in place to support pioneering students. In conclusion, the panel finds that KU Leuven is in the process of deploying an integrated approach across the student journey to become more inclusive. It suggests that all elements of programmes should become increasingly inclusive by design, by monitoring closely how diversity fits into the mindset across the programmes.

Going digital post covid

The panel explored KU Leuven's vision on 'Going Digital' in a post-covid timeframe. It learned that the institute aspires to a digital transformation through a flexible implementation depending on the context, avoiding a 'one size fits all' solution. The panel was impressed with the 'Going digital, staying human' strategy, continuing the digital orientation, but adding an emphasis on student and staff wellbeing. It noted that KU Leuven indeed has a strong starting position to make this happen. KU Leuven's technological backbone has already been well developed, due to investments in the past, that will be continued in the future. KU Leuven explained that the way this technology will be used will depend on the willingness and ability of staff and students, which is why further emphasis is put on these two stakeholder groups. The panel appreciates and supports this course of action. Professional development of staff is to be a priority in years to come, with the KU Leuven Learning Lab playing a leading role. The development of a more holistic approach to student guidance, supporting learning and living

of students in one integrated model, is another layer that is added, in order to implement the 'Going digital, staying human' vision.

Quality culture

The panel observed engagement with, and ownership of, the mission, vision and strategic priorities of KU Leuven in all of the conversations. It struck the panel that there is an exceptionally strong identification and engagement with the university (“we@KU Leuven”). The panel was impressed with the strong institutional commitment to education in a research-driven university. Internal stakeholders, notably students, expressed their appreciation for the degree to which they were being heard. The different layers of the institution and the many stakeholders seem to be collaborating closely, working side by side, and exchanging ideas. The governance model, with subsidiarity, autonomy and accountability as its guiding principles, is a lever for the further development of this quality culture. The panel was very positively impressed by the openness to accept good ideas that are generated bottom-up, which added to the panel’s impression of KU Leuven being an evolving, learning organization.

Institutional leadership

During the conversations, it struck the panel that there is a clear willingness of KU Leuven to be a Flanders-wide beacon. Indeed, the panel noted KU Leuven’s position as Flanders’ largest university, and, in addition, its partnership with university colleges in the KU Leuven Association comes with some responsibilities. The panel was pleased to see that KU Leuven is already assuming a leadership role when it comes to the preparations around a Flemish decree on improving study progress and completion rate. Indeed, it is imperative to work together with, and influence, the Flemish government to evolve towards regulations that allow institutions to match the existing competences and potential of new study entrants with the starting requirements applicable at university level. Yet there may be opportunities to strengthen this role further. One striking example where action is required, is the current unacceptable work-life balance of the medical specialists in training (MST) in the Master of Medicine in Specialist Studies in Medicine. The panel would like to encourage KU Leuven to use its position to influence Flemish education/health authorities to look for a solution.

3 Conclusion

KU Leuven's vision and strategic goals are future-oriented, representing important challenges for years to come, while also building on continuity. The panel highly values KU Leuven's strong commitment to education, which was evident throughout the site visits, and which is all the more noteworthy in a research-intensive university. In line with its ambition to be a pioneer, KU Leuven sets itself ambitious goals to enhance students' active learning and to improve study progress. Recently, KU Leuven has further developed its *Going Digital* strategic priority into *Going Digital, Stay Human*, to fit the post-Covid reality and place adequate emphasis on student's and staff's wellbeing. This proves that KU Leuven has its finger on the pulse to adapt its course on current societal challenges.

KU Leuven's governance model, and the policy instruments it has in place, set the stage for KU Leuven to be able to deliver on its ambitious agenda. Clear policy goals have been formulated and key performance indicators monitor the degree to which goals are achieved. The institute's financial strategy ensures that ample resources are available, for the moment, to back policy priorities. There has been a continual investment in infrastructure, number of (support) staff, and professional development, which provide the basis to answer future-oriented student educational needs.

This reality puts KU Leuven in a good position to manage the potential unlimited growth of students in the short term, while also preserving, and even developing, quality of education. Still, the panel wishes to point out that the current Flemish financing system, with allocation lagging behind actual student growth, puts KU Leuven at risk in the longer term. Navigating the current financial system will require further strategic choices and prioritization of resources to avoid risks in the longer term. Also, it is imperative to work together with other Flemish higher education institutions to influence the Flemish government to evolve towards an approach that better matches the starting competences of new entrants with the starting requirements applicable at university level. Also, the funding system should be in line with the entry requirements: if the government continues with the 'open intake' approach, then a (semi-) open funding system that keeps resources in line with further growth of the student population is essential. The panel encourages KU Leuven to continue to assume a leadership role in this respect.

The panel welcomes KU Leuven's 'first milestone' policy as this has the potential to improve study progress and completion rate, in order for students not to waste valuable years without obtaining a degree, while at the same time mitigating somewhat student population growth. While highly valuing the initiative, the panel has some concern about the balance between numbers-based and people-based guidance alongside the first milestone policy. It suggests that KU Leuven monitors closely for any unwanted effects, notably on students from diverse backgrounds. It was pleased to learn that the panel's concern is already on the radar. The panel also appreciates that orientation and reorientation of students is high on the agenda. The 'network of opportunities' that the KU Leuven Association offers is a real strength in this regard.

KU Leuven has set up a governance model that is effective for educational policy implementation on the one hand, and quality assurance of education on the other. The panel concludes that subsidiarity, autonomy and accountability really form the backbone of KU Leuven's governance, transcending the status of mere principles. The principle of escalation, which is central to educational policy and the quality control vision at KU Leuven, is working well, with the feedback loops between the programme, the faculty and central level adequately putting the information on the level where a decision is best taken. That university-wide policies are decided, taking input from lower levels of governance into account (bottom up), and that flexible implementation is possible according to the local context, results in ownership of policies that have been decided centrally. In the same vein, there seems to be a very strong engagement in, and ownership of, quality control and development at all levels of governance. Still, KU Leuven's governance model involves complicated layers, and requires many people to step up into a leadership role. The panel

suggests that KU Leuven should continue to invest in supporting and coaching staff and to develop a talent pipeline so that the right people are ready and willing to step up at the right time.

KU Leuven has everything in place to ensure that the quality of each accredited programme is confirmed in an internationally accepted manner. COBRA provides a minimal framework, which integrates each of the eight quality characteristics that are required by decree. The panel concludes that external stakeholders are involved at all governance levels. In recent years, there have been continued efforts to improve the quality of this external engagement, by adding guidelines on the different kinds of stakeholders that need to be involved, in order to obtain a valid independent view. During the site visits, the panel ascertained that independent peers are sufficiently involved in the quality assurance process.

The POCs are given the responsibility and trust to implement COBRA according to the local needs and quality culture. The panel concludes that the POCs are taking ownership of the quality assurance process. Systems-based (formal) and people-based (informal) elements of quality assurance are both clearly present, which allows the PDCA-cycle to run continuously, with the POC and the FPOC at the programme and faculty level serving as the engine. Dashboards at different levels provide a continuous overview of different quality characteristics and allow for data-driven quality assurance on the one hand, and timely identification of potential risks on the other.

Still, this well thought-through and highly performing system also comes with some challenges. While the tools available in COBRA provide a lot of data, there is a risk of overload. The panel recommends that KU Leuven should monitor whether the current set-up leaves enough time to reflect on what the data mean, and whether this is then followed by effective 'acting' and 'doing' phases. There is a risk in not setting priorities, and time must be taken to reflect on what to reduce or stop doing, in order for the quality of education to remain high.

The panel also feels that there is room for improvement in closing the feedback loop towards students. The panel noted that changes following student feedback need to be shared more consistently with the students. Coherence and communications could also be improved through involving a wider range of students beyond the elected and serving student representatives.

A strongly developed quality culture is a requirement for KU Leuven's trust-based system to work properly. The panel found that a consistent and effective quality culture is fully embedded in KU Leuven's nerve system. A strong identification with, and high level of commitment to, KU Leuven was apparent in all conversations. The focus on continuous improvement was obvious throughout. The importance of informal feedback loops, in addition to the formal loops, was emphasized repeatedly. An image emerged from the conversations with support staff, academic staff and student representatives that they collaborate closely with each other. Nevertheless, the panel also noted that there are still varying degrees of student involvement in quality assurance. A check as to what extent hierarchical structures and power can be deconstructed to open up more egalitarian contexts could be explored.

The panel concludes that, in addition to trust-based elements and quality culture, the necessary checks and balances are also in place, with COOK playing an important role in monitoring the implementation of the minimal requirements set by COBRA. The panel received ample proof that issues that arise, or points of improvement that are detected, are followed up. The panel values that COBRA is evaluated in this way, after each cycle, and then optimized further. It welcomes that a new Educational Quality Assurance Committee has recently been implemented as an extra layer of checks and balances, and that this Committee can act as a sufficiently independent body to advise the Executive Board on issues that cannot be resolved at lower levels of governance.

It is clear that for KU Leuven's governance model and quality assurance system to work, (educational) leadership development should be a high priority. In this sense, the panel

appreciates the increased focus on teaching quality in recruiting and promoting staff. They welcome a positive focus on quality (rather than quantity) in recruitment of academic staff, as well as the serious inclusion of teaching in considerations for promotion, the latter via the teaching portfolio and a bio-sketch. The panel noted that thorough new measures are available for improving leadership at various levels and for different categories of staff and posts. Still, the panel also noted that current support and professional development is geared mainly at new and junior staff, or staff members who are aspiring to be promoted, which may lead to the exclusion of a number of staff members, who may be critical and resistant to the change needed to guarantee that the quality characteristics are upheld fully, and across all of KU Leuven. The panel asks KU Leuven to continue to look for ways to broaden further the reach of its professionalization initiatives.

The trails allowed the panel to assess the degree to which the vision on education and educational quality is implemented in different programmes and faculties. It found that programmes and faculties in the trails align with the policy priorities set at the central level. However, the panel noted that there is room for improvement in clarifying the ambitions regarding interdisciplinarity in education further, as this ambition was operationalized in different ways, with examples ranging from multi-, to inter-, intra- and trans-disciplinarity.

The panel also explored whether and how KU Leuven realizes its ambition to be an inclusive university. It noted that appropriate regulations are in place to satisfy statutory requirements about equal opportunities, and welcomes that recruitment rates of female professors have risen almost to parity with male professors recently. Still, it also noted that the most prestigious roles and elected leadership positions remain mainly male, and points out that more system changes may be required to change this. Additionally, there is a need to monitor how diversity is in the mindset of the programmes, and to continue to address elements of diversity that are unconscious. Furthermore, the panel noted that there is a need to add or complement diversity dimensions, such as ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ and socio-economic perspectives.

The panel concludes that measures across the whole range of the student journey are being taken in order to be more inclusive for students. The panel strongly supports KU Leuven's steps to move student services closer to the students, in order to maximize inclusion and remove thresholds for all students in general, and for students with diversity characteristics in particular. The panel advises KU Leuven to continue to imprint a broad approach to diversity in mindsets across programmes, and to remove barriers towards achieving greater diversity, while this often occurs at the unconscious level.

On the basis of the above assessment, the panel advises the NVAO to make a positive institutional review decision.

The panel wishes to formulate the following recommendations:

- Continue to monitor the financial situation closely. Ensure that strategic choices are made and strategic resources are prioritized, in order to continue to safeguard high-quality education in an insecure financial environment;
- Assume a leadership role in working together with, and influencing the Flemish government on selected topics, such as 1) financing their tertiary educational institutions in consideration of additional costs associated with growth in student numbers, 2) developing, in collaboration, regulations that allow institutions to match the existing competences and potential of new study entrants with the starting requirements applicable at university level, and 3) ensuring a more healthy work-life balance is possible for specialist doctors in training.
- Clarify the interdisciplinary ambitions in education;
- Further remove existing barriers to becoming a more inclusive university;
- Monitor whether the current set-up of the PDCA-cycle leaves enough time for 'acting' and 'doing';
- Close the feedback loop to students.

Appendix 1: Composition of the panel

The assessment was carried out by a panel of experts appointed and trained by NVAO. It is composed as follows:

Sarah Springman (*chair*), Full Professor for Geotechnical Engineering at ETH Zurich since January 1997 and Rector of the university from January 2015 until February 2022. Member of the decision-making committee of the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ). Currently, Principal of St Hilda's College, Oxford.

Nora de Leeuw (*panel member*), Executive Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of Leeds. Professor Theoretical Geochemistry and Mineralogy, Utrecht University. From 2015 to 2019 Pro-Vice Chancellor International, Cardiff University.

Agneta Bladh (*panel member*), President of the Governing Board of the Swedish Research Council; former Rector of University of Kalmar and former State Secretary for Higher Education and Research, Sweden.

Jonas De Raeve (*panel member*), Senior Advisor for Education, VOKA (Flemish Network of Employers).

Kristin Bartik (*panel member*), Full Professor in Molecular Engineering and Diplomatic Counselor to the Rector at Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Vice-Rector of the ULB in charge of University Strategy and Institutional Relations (2017-2020).

Anthony Longo (*panel member*), master's student in Digital Culture and Society, King's College London and PhD Philosophy student at the University of Antwerp. In Antwerp, he was President of the Student Council and President of the Student Forum of YUFE.

The committee was assisted by:

- **Mark Frederiks** (process coordinator), NVAO policy advisor.
- **Jetje De Groof** (external secretary), independent higher education consultant, Eduflow bv.

All panel members have signed the NVAO Code of Ethics.

Appendix 2: Programme for the dialogue with the institution

Programme exploratory site visit 22 November 2021

Time slot	Programme
08.15 am - 09.30 am	Meet & greet
09.30 am - 10.30 am	Introduction to KU Leuven
10.30 am - 11.00 am	Break – relocation to Agora
11.00 am - 00.30 pm	Dialogue 1A – on a theme from a theme from the critical reflection
	Dialogue 1B – on a theme from a theme from the critical reflection
12.30 am - 01.30 pm	Lunch review panel Lunch KU Leuven
01.30 pm - 03.00 pm	Dialogue 2 – towards the key considerations and the model of quality culture
03.00 pm - 03.30 pm	Break
03.30 pm - 04.30 pm	Private meeting review panel Private meeting KU Leuven
04.30 pm - 05.00 pm	Cocreation of the review trails
05.00 pm - 05.30 pm	Close of the day

Programme in-depth site visit 23 – 24 – 25 March 2022

Topics

- Topic 1 - Governance and allocation model in relation to the interdisciplinary ambitions and managing the growth of the university
- Topic 2 – Study progress – completion rate
- Topic 3: Valorization of teaching and leadership tasks
- Topic 4: Interconnection between formal and informal quality assurance
- Topic 5: COBRA at work at the programme level

Programme Wednesday 23 March 2022

Time	Subject
09.00 – 09.30 AM	Welcome + briefing KU Leuven participants conversation 1
09.30 – 12.00 AM	Conversation at university level - focus on topics 1, 2, and 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 09.30 – 09.40AM: Welcome by Luc Sels and Tine Baelmans • 09.40 – 10.20AM: Topic 1 – 10 min presentation + 30 min discussion • 10.20 – 10.30AM: switch participants • 10.30 – 11.10AM: Topic 2 – 10 min presentation + 30 min discussion • 11.10 - 11.20AM: switch participants • 11.20 – 12.00AM: Topic 3 – 10 min presentation + 30 min discussion
12.00 – 02.00 PM	Private lunch review panel
12.00 – 12.30 AM	Private meeting KU Leuven – debriefing conversation 1
12.30 – 01.30 PM	Private Lunch KU Leuven
01.30 – 02.00 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – briefing RT 1 HIR
02.00 – 04.30 PM	Review trail 1: <i>Master of Science in Business Engineering</i> (Leuven) (Dutch-language programme and English-language programme) - focus on topics 2, 4 and 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 02.00 – 02.15PM: introduction • 02.15 – 03.30PM: Topic 5 and 4 • 03.30 – 03.45PM: break • 03.45 – 04.30PM: Topic 2
04.30 – 05.30 PM	Private meeting review panel
04.30 – 05.00 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – debriefing RT 1 HIR
05.00 – 05.30 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – briefing deans and vice-deans RT 2 and RT 3 (online)

Programme Thursday 24 March 2022

Time	Subject
08.30 – 09.00 AM	<i>Short guided tour before start of the meeting</i>
08.00 – 09.00 AM	Welcome KU Leuven participants + briefing RT 2 MSG
09.00 – 10.30 AM	Review trail 2: <i>Master of Medicine in Specialist Studies in Medicine</i> (Leuven) - focus on topics 2, 4 and 5
10.30 – 11.00 AM	Private meeting KU Leuven – debriefing RT 2 MSG
10.30 – 11.00 AM	<i>Break review panel</i>
11.00 – 12.00 AM	Open consultation review panel
11.00 – 12.00 AM	<i>Break KU Leuven</i>
12.00 – 02.00 PM	<i>Private lunch review panel</i>
12.00 – 01.30 PM	<i>Private lunch KU Leuven</i>
01.30 – 02.00 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – briefing RT 3 LAW
02.00 – 04.30 PM	Review trail 3: <i>Bachelor of Laws in Laws</i> (Leuven) - focus on topics 2, 4 and 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 02.00 – 02.15PM: introduction • 02.15 – 02.50PM: Topic 2 • 02.50 – 03.05PM: break + switch participants • 03.05 – 04.30PM: Topic 5 and 4
04.30 – 05.30 PM	Private meeting review panel
04.30 – 05.00 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – debriefing RT3
05.00 – 05.30 PM	Private meeting KU Leuven – briefing participants conversation 2 (online)

Programme Friday 25 March 2022

08.30 – 09.00 AM	Welcome + briefing KU Leuven participants conversation 2
09.00 – 10.30 AM	Conversation at university level - focus on the review trails, topic 4 and topic 5 + cocreation
10.30 – 12.00 AM	Private meeting review panel
10.30 – 12.00 AM	Private meeting KU Leuven: debriefing conversation 2 + debriefing in-dept visit
12.00 – 12.30 AM	Final Feedback session
12.30 – 01.00 PM	<i>Joint lunch</i>

Appendix 3: Accountability

The assessment included in this report was carried out on the basis of the “*Institutional Review Assessment Framework*” of June 2020, as ratified by the Flemish government on 27 November 2020.

After the application submitted by the institution was declared admissible, NVAO set up an expert panel. This panel was approved by the executive board of NVAO. The institution did not object to the panel composition.

The panel prepared for the assessment on the basis of the documents provided by the institution. Prior to a preparatory meeting, each panel member made an initial appraisal and questions were listed.

During the preparatory work, the panel further discussed all the information obtained and also prepared the dialogue with the institution.

In line with NVAO's Appreciative Approach, the panel explored the context of the institution further during the dialogue and, on the basis of this, conducted an investigation that enabled it to develop joint insights with the institution about the status of the implementation of education policy and in terms of confirming ‘quality’ within the institution.

During the concluding work, the panel discussed all the information obtained and translated it into a holistic judgement. The panel has reached this conclusion in complete independence.

The data available has been processed into a draft assessment report. Once all panel members had agreed with the contents of the assessment report, the chair of the panel adopted the assessment report. The assessment report, as adopted by the chair, was submitted to NVAO.

Appendix 4: Overview of the material studied

Documentation made available with the application

Site visit 1

- Website containing Critical reflection

Site visit 2

- Institutional review – Additional information in preparation for the second site visit
- Institutional review – Additional information on the Master of Medicine in Specialist Studies in Medicine

Colofon

KU LEUVEN • VL110131-21
Institutional Review • Assessment Report
16 May 2022
Compilation: NVAO • Flanders



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