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The international panel is highly impressed by the ongoing reform process for Poland's higher education and research sector. Poland initiated with the new law for universities an important positive process in higher education. The universities now enjoy more autonomy than before, which they can use for leveraging their governance structures, to make them stronger and more effective. The universities can now largely set their own course in the current competitive international higher education landscape.

The purpose of the excellence program is to stimulate a small number of Poland's universities to become on a par with Europe's best research intensive universities. The communication from the Ministry has been clear in the purpose of "Excellence Initiative – Research University" Programme. This is made explicit in the "Communication from the Minister of Science and Higher Education" document that the panel received prior to the evaluation of the proposals from the pre-selected universities. The panel has assessed all submitted material and the results of the interviews with the 20 pre-selected universities against the specific criteria of the programme, and based on this extensive information formed its independent opinion.

The international panel emphasizes that all 20 pre-selected universities are already winners by being invited to take part in this competition. This is in line with the Ministry's Communication, which states that up to 10 universities will be selected to receive a 10% increase of their basic government grant, while the remainder of the pre-selected universities will receive a 2% increase. The panel strongly encourages each and all of the 20 universities to continue on the path they have chosen towards higher levels of quality, relevance and internationalization of their activities and programs, taking into account the panel's recommendations.

A key feature of the Excellence Initiative was achievability within the relatively short timescale through to December 2025. It takes a very long time to change traditions and embedded institutionalized practices, and in order to reach higher impact on international front-line research, the realistic time-scale is decades rather than years and sustaining improved performance will be crucial. Therefore, it is important that the Polish universities commit themselves to strive towards excellence for many years to come.

We were impressed by the depth of the analysis and seriousness of planning made by the 20 universities; it underscores that all universities have already gained from going through the application and review exercise. It was encouraging to meet with and interview the 20 university teams.

The panel identified some general points where the plans could have been strengthened and which we believe would help the development of the universities and assist in future applications to similar programmes:

- The universities' plans were almost silent on the key question of whether their academic structures, and present institutional governance and leadership were conducive to the promotion of international-quality research. Bearing in mind the significance of this Excellence Initiative to the universities, it was surprising that in a good number of cases Rectors were not present at the interviews. The panel would like to underline the crucial importance of committed engagement of rectors and university boards (councils) in a constructive change process.
- Variable enthusiasm is evident from the plans for consolidating the university system. For example, collaboration with other local universities through the formation of a local (or regional) federation or even mergers. However, there is great potential for efficiency gains and improvement by promoting cross-disciplinary research and formation of critical mass between universities, which would strengthen the research base and increase international reputation. Further, cooperation with local non-university research institutions was not evident. Indeed the benefits from reorganising the institutional landscape has not yet been exploited.
- In a number of cases universities did not pay enough attention to the importance of recruiting and developing their human capital (excellent researchers), and were instead giving priority to administrative human resource issues or were even focused on investment in physical infrastructure (equipment and buildings) as a means to become an international research intensive university. It should not be forgotten that recruiting and retaining excellent research staff is a fundamental pre-condition to success.
- Insufficient attention was paid to the use of imaginative employment arrangements (such as fractional appointments) in order to attract leading scientists (back) to Poland, and in this manner build upon the extensive Polish diaspora of research scientists.
- In some cases, the assumption seemed to be that an enhancement of facilities such as research infrastructure (based on presumed needs) would facilitate recruitment; another approach would be to identify target academics and then determine what facilities they would require. This latter approach is used widely in other countries to successfully attract leading researchers.

- Not enough consideration was given to the timescale of the impact of proposed initiatives on the university's research performance. For example, recruitment of leading researchers would be expected to have a short-term impact, while enhancement of the career development of PhD students and early-career researchers would take longer to impact institutional performance.
- Deadlines for completion of actions were too frequently at the end of the funding period (72 months); this does not serve well either internal monitoring of progress or the intended mid-term external review.
- In general, there was insufficient appreciation of the broader benefits of supporting international collaborations through joint supervision of PhD students, which may well lead to more extensive collaborations. This approach generally represents very good value for money.

In conclusion:

It is noted that all 20 universities have put a great deal of effort in providing a perspective on their performance and compiling comprehensive sets of data on their activities and resources. A substantial effort was dedicated to their SWOT analyses, plans and interviews; all universities showed a very positive engagement and good intentions in their approach. They all have, to varying degrees, started on a very positive journey to a more research-intensive position, improving their research, education and international visibility, but for some it may take a little longer to realise their ambitions and to become ready to invest the extra funding effectively. Some of the SWOT analyses were in the end too detailed and extensive, which may have actually made them less useful.

The legal, economic and societal environments of the universities are changing quickly and it is, as one would expect, a challenge for the universities to change the structures and organizational culture that have been institutionalized over many decades in such a way that they are driven primarily by merit and excellence.

The panel members are all very keen to assist the Polish university system develop and become competitive internationally and found your words extremely encouraging in terms of support and long-term commitment. The panel members were extremely diligent in their assessment and considerations of each university, over a period of several months, and all aspects of the submission and interviews were considered in detail. The panel has paid specific attention to all written comments to the draft reports received from the universities and revised the reports when appropriate.

The interviews were extremely informative and very helpful for the panel, and although they largely confirmed the views of the panel members from the written proposals, in a number of cases they were very re-assuring, even raising the perceptions (and assessments). At the same time, in just a few cases the interviews showed that the university in question still has further to go and that the submitted material was not fully supported by the discussions. What also became clear from the interviews was the level of engagement of the leadership, and the importance of the commitment and enthusiasm when it came to presenting the universities' plans and ambitions.

The international panel underscores that Poland's excellence initiative is not a traditional academic ranking, but a forward-looking assessment of whether it is likely that the individual universities can reach their targets within the time-frame of this program. The panel has, based on the above observations and its thorough assessment of the proposed plans and interviews with all 20 universities, decided to recommend that the following universities should be awarded the higher level of additional subvention funding at this stage of the excellence initiative. The list shows the result of the panel's assessment and the final scores in front of the name of the university:

36,5 University of Warsaw
35,0 Gdańsk University of Technology
34,0 Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
34,0 AGH University of Science and Technology
34,0 Jagiellonian University in Cracow
34,0 Warsaw University of Technology
33,5 Medical University of Gdańsk
33,0 Silesian University of Technology
32,5 Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
31,5 University of Wrocław

In addition, the international panel's conclusion is that the *Medical University of Białystok* merits special mention, but falls just short in this competition for receiving the additional 10% (regular) subvention under Poland's excellence program. Nonetheless, the panel is convinced that the submitted plan of the university offers a strong foundation for the realization of its ambitions to become a well focused, excellent research-intensive university focused on personalised medicine.

30,5 Medical University of Białystok

The following nine universities are recommended to continue their, in some cases, ambitious change processes and to prepare themselves to participate in forthcoming national and international competitions:

27,5 Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences

25,0 University of Silesia in Katowice

24,0 University of Łódź

23,5 Medical University of Łódź

23,0 University of Gdańsk

21,5 Wrocław University of Science and Technology

20,5 Lodz University of Technology

20,5 Pedagogical University of Cracow

20,5 Poznan University of Medical Sciences

The international panel has indicated for each university a number of concerns, which the university should pay specific attention to towards mid-term review in order to fulfil their ambition. Further, the panel strongly recommends that consideration be given to mechanisms (intended to be advisory and non-intrusive) for the monitoring of progress over the next six years; and that the universities and the ministry pay special attention to three key issues on which an assessment of progress should be integrated in the mid-term review:

- improving governance, management and internal organisation in all of the universities selected in the first round, and indeed for all prospective universities
- progress towards alliances and mergers particularly in cases where several institutions are in the same city
- investing in human capital as the highest priority, which means recruiting, cultivating and retaining the best talent both as staff, particularly early career academics, and students
- regular monitoring of progress by the governing bodies (councils) of the universities; the Ministry also monitor its overall program

The international review panel is grateful to you as Minister, the Ministry and the IDUB team for leaving the review completely in the hands of the panel and for providing the panel with all of the information it has requested expediently and in a very timely manner. The panel has worked fully independently and the Ministry has respected the arms-length principle and provided objective, excellent statistical and other material necessary for conducting a fair and orderly assessment of Poland's 20 pre-selected research universities.

On behalf of the international review panel

Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen

Chairman of the International Review Panel