

*Dear Minister Dariusz Wiczorek
Minister of Science*

Congratulations and our best wishes for your tenure as Minister for Science in Poland.

The IDUB international review panel is pleased to report substantial progress towards international research prominence, prompted and enabled by enhanced financial support to the group of ten universities selected in the first iteration of the programme.

During the IDUB mid-term review the panel observed the change process in Poland's research universities. The purpose of the excellence program is to stimulate a small number of Poland's universities to become competitive with Europe's best research-intensive universities. The panel also notes Poland's efforts to incentivise, through parallel mechanisms, the improvement of its regional universities and of teaching universities.

The panel commends the Ministry for having implemented an advisory and non-intrusive IDUB monitoring system, and for having invited members of the international panel to participate in the three IDUB conferences held 2020-22. The panel advised the Ministry to pay special attention to three key issues in the mid-term review:

- governance, management, and internal organisation in all the universities selected in the first round, and indeed for all prospective universities; and regular monitoring of progress by the governing bodies (councils) of the universities;
- progress towards alliances and mergers particularly in cases where several institutions are in the same city; and
- 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.

The panel has formed its independent opinion based on extensive information, including reviews of documents in the OSF system, site-visits to all 10 universities, and interviews with staff and students. The team of experts met with hundreds of university staff and leadership representatives during the 10 site-visits; they concluded that the site-visits were an essential component of a fair and rigorous assessment process.

All 10 IDUB universities receive a positive review.

IDUB is a programme designed to stimulate transformation; therefore, universities have been evaluated based on progress in that transformation and not on a transcript of established achievements. A key feature of the Excellence Initiative is achievability of tangible progress within the short timescale of the programme. We recognise, however, that changes to traditions and embedded practices can take decades, rather than years; sustaining improved performance will therefore be essential to the achievement of international research prominence.

The expert panel observed remarkable cultural changes following introduction of the law 2.0 of 2018 and supported by the flexibility provided by IDUB. In some of the 10 universities the sense of ownership and pride was obvious and any delays in implementation of IDUB priorities were mostly due to effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and geopolitical circumstances. In others, however, self-confidence over-shadowed the new opportunities and the flexibility and economic space provided by IDUB was not well appreciated; some reluctance to change prevailed. In general, it was not clear when developments were caused by demographic trends, budget- or legal-constraints, rather than a proactive change process facilitated by IDUB. Each university builds on its unique history, and the participating universities have vastly different starting points for developing into international-standard research-intensive universities. Each individual university followed its own transformative path and at a different pace; not all have paid attention to the three points

mentioned above, and some have mostly been preoccupied with defending their perceived status. The panel notes one common feature for the 10 universities: they are all investing in and improving their human capital. An important part of this process has to a varying degree been diversification of staff both in terms of age, gender, and nationality.

Less impressive, in most cases, have been efforts to improve governance and internal organisation. Actions taken to eliminate unnecessary compartmentalization within the universities remain to be seen. The organograms remain too complicated, and universities should again be encouraged to carefully review their internal structures and look for ways to increase both efficiency and impact. The panel noted substantial variability between universities with respect to engagement by the rectors; we commend those universities where this engagement is clear and strategic. It is highly satisfactory that the IDUB programmes in some universities continued with maintained momentum across leadership changes. We recommend, however, that university leadership teams make more intensive use of advice from external advisory councils and other sources of inspiration.

There remain underexploited opportunities in Poland to improve efficiency in the higher education sector through institutional consolidation. Additionally, there is great potential for improving both the efficiency and quality of research by promoting cross-disciplinary activity, and by achieving “critical mass” (meaning a scale of activity enabling truly sustainable progress and achievement) in key research areas through close collaboration between universities, and with local non-university research institutions. There is scope for consolidation of higher education institutions in several of Poland’s major cities, including full mergers when appropriate. Increased attention to these areas would substantially benefit both the quality and impact of research output, and lead to an enhanced international reputation for Poland’s universities.

In general, a culture of application and competition for grants and of rewards for high achievers is becoming both accepted and welcomed. Winning national research grants is crucial as an important precursor to successful international applications. In some cases, we noted – and commend – a developing appreciation of the importance of leading, rather than simply participating in, international applications.

In conclusion

The international review panel commends the Ministry and the country for having sustained IDUB, and the universities for having gone far along the path to implement IDUB concepts under challenging external conditions caused by a disruptive pandemic and a deteriorating geopolitical situation. The legal, economic, and societal environments of the universities are changing quickly, and it is a challenge for the universities to rapidly change structures and organizational culture, which have been institutionalized over many decades. Nevertheless, the panel found strong evidence that the IDUB funding has facilitated significant cultural change and advanced the university system substantially. All mid-term reports are up-loaded to the OSF-system. Recommendations have been made for each university, to which the university should pay specific attention during the second half of this initial funding period, in order to fulfil their ambitions and fully exploit the opportunities provided by the IDUB scheme.

The international review panel is grateful to you as Minister, the Ministry and the IDUB team for enabling the panel to work fully independently, and for providing us with all necessary information both promptly and effectively. We believe the outcome is a fair and orderly assessment of Poland’s 10 selected research universities under the IDUB programme.

On behalf of the international review panel



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