RESEARCH ACTIVITY AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA: STATE AND PERSPECTIVES

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1. Introduction

The National Strategy for Development of Scientific Research recognises that scientific research, technological advancement and innovations are the drivers of the modern knowledge-based economy. Therefore, the Academic Board views research activity as the main tool for enhancing the university competitiveness through establishing and implementing a policy of stimulating innovation, increasing staff and student participation in international research projects, providing scientific services to business, government and social partners. The implementation of this policy would secure an equal footing for the university in the European research community and would achieve the goals of the Strategy for Intelligent Sustainable and Inclusive Growth. The aim of this article is to analyse the state of research activity at the University of Economics - Varna for the period 2011-2015, as well as to outline the direction of its development in accordance with the Strategy for Development of Higher Education and the National Strategy for Development of Scientific Research.

There are various forms and organisational patterns of research activity taking place at the University of Economics - Varna. In accordance with the structure of the Mandate programme and the Mandate Programme Progress Report the following paper presents the completed scientific projects, organised events and published research for the period.

2. Government purpose-funded research projects

The period 2011-2015 was marked by academic staff involvement in research projects which were mainly funded by the state budget. The efforts of the Academic Board have contributed a great deal towards improving conditions for participation in competitions by updating the internal guideline, allocating larger budgets for projects, and seeking opportunities for co-financing and others. At the beginning of the period there were 18 projects running and towards its end - 49 projects. Interest is strongest in financing longer-term more practically oriented research projects.

Respectively, the amount of planned and reported funding for research projects has been growing. In the beginning of the period the budget was 109,818 BGN, with
40 193 BGN reported. At the end, the budgeted funds amounted to 113,134 BGN with 80,913 BGN used and reported. It has been established that despite creating good conditions for project implementation, the actual absorption of funds remains rather limited – between 55% and 71%. Absorption rate is at its highest for practically-orientated research projects and the lowest rates of absorption are exhibited in the support for quantitative dissertation research projects.

A wide range of PhD graduates, associate professors, PhD students, undergraduates and other professionals take part in these projects. In certain years the total number of project participants has reached as many as 200. The majority of participants are members of the academic staff and student body of the University of Economics - Varna. Among these, the highest is the number of participating associate professors - 51 in the last year.

On the one hand, lack of or insufficient external funding can be viewed as a disadvantage of this form of scientific research. This could be attributed to both low initiative on the part of academic staff and lack of specific interest by the business. Another weakness of this form of research activity is the lack of interest in participation in international scientific programmes and additional funding for ongoing projects by national and international funding organisations. On the other hand, the research project competitions, funded by the State budget, have their role in revitalising and maintaining the research activity and scientific life. They prove to be the main academic outlet for the faculty staff. Competitions allow for large-scale research with significant results for the economic practice, as well as for disseminating the results of these projects. Last but not least, these projects facilitate the exchange of efforts between professionals of various disciplines and scientific backgrounds, between scientists of different generations, and help to attract professionals from other universities and from the business practice. Thus, projects prove to be a flexible form of scientific research work with substantial potential.

3. Scientific Research Centres

In view of developing the organisational infrastructure of research activity between 2011-2015, work has begun on creating research centres. These include the Research and Application Centre for New Information and Communication Technologies, Financial Research and Development Centre, Social Research Centre, Innovations and Development Centre, Globalisation and Direct Foreign Investment Research Centre. The new units have managed to carry out organisational and regulatory preparation as well as practical work.

The Research and Application Centre for New Information and Communication Technologies has completed a series of projects such as “IT Skills – the Required
Minimum”, “IT Master class”, the “Paid Leave Management” software system, an integrated system for term-time assignments and end-of-term exams, a software system for timetable planning, web-based system for curriculum design and management, web-based register system for prospective students.

Through the “IT Skills – the Required Minimum” project, Varna University of Economics has turned into a hi-tech i-zone, where the activities around the learning process, research and administrative services for students, etc., are based around the potential of IT and communication technologies. Thanks to the above project, not only was the traditional educational model developed, but a new one with an emphasis on business was put forward. The “Paid Leave Management” system is used to automatically plan and account for paid leaves of faculty members and non-academic staff of the University of Economics - Varna. The web-based platform for registration and admission of new students changes age-old traditions and practices and allows for more choices for applicants in terms of dates and number of exams they want to sit. Extensive adjustments have been made to the test system and new question databases have been compiled for the exam topics. As a consequence of the active work record, the financial results of the Centre are positive.

The Social Research Centre has conducted 26 research projects for external and internal clients. The total amount for contracts and internal tasks is 68 656 BGN pre-VAT, with 75 % from external clients.

Most of the research projects have been commissioned by the “Prevention” office of Varna City Council. Among the rest of the clients of the Social Research Centre are Not-for-Profit “MIG Devnya – Aksakovo”, “Bulgarian Sociological Society” Ltd., “Smart Consulting Cluster”, “Varna Fusion and Catering” Ltd., “Eva Commerce-12” Ltd., “Discont – Krasimir Damyanov”. During the period covered, the Centre has also completed 8 research projects commissioned by the Rector of the Varna University of Economics.

The Innovations and Development Centre has worked on two national, four international and over 10 business projects. Some include “European Policies and Non-technological Innovations Good Practice” - a pilot project for developing a unified methodology for reference budgeting in Europe, “Black Sea Coastal Network for Regional Development”, “Information Systems and Technologies Management” etc.

The projects’ topics cover key areas such as non-technological innovation, application of innovative development methods for organisations and developing innovative methodologies in the area of economics. The results of these projects have been promoted through the partnership network of the ID centre. The reference framework for applied competencies in business education has been approbated in the educational process of the University of Economics - Varna. It has been singled out as a good
practice by partners on the InnoMot project “Enhancing Regional Policies through Support and Motivation for SMEs in Introducing Non-technological Innovations”. The Innovations and Development Centre has taken active part in activities under project BG051PO001-3.1.07-0058 “Business Modelling of Curricula and Programmes”. It has produced and implemented a model for collaboration between businesses and academia thanks to which the students at the University of Economics - Varna acquire applicable knowledge and skills related to the requirements of the labour market.

The development of a network of research centres is a step forward towards creating an adequate scientific research infrastructure. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that splitting up the activities and the absence of a clear subject for applying and receiving funding limits their abilities. The challenges posed by the updated National Strategy for Scientific Research Development and the Higher Education Development Strategy in Bulgaria require universities to look for new organisational, legal, financial and other forms. The research activity of University of Economics - Varna needs to turn into an autonomous and largely self-sustaining branch, closely connected to servicing the business and public administration. The next mandate has to begin by creating an institution with a structural unit status as per the Higher Education Act, which would, through the magic of synergy, combine the efforts of the existing research centres.

4. Publishing activity of the academic staff

Another form of scientific research activity at the University of Economics - Varna is the papers published by the academic staff. For the specified mandate period the Academic Board has created a series of additional conditions to increase scientific output. The fees for publishing papers, studies and monographs in the University's academic editions have been increased, and there are opportunities for salary formation in relation to scientific publications etc. The following table presents a summary of academic staff publishing data.
Publishing activity of staff according to type and department for 2011-2014 *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Type</th>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Finance and Accounting</th>
<th>Economics</th>
<th>Informatics</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>College of Tourism</th>
<th>Language Department</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monographs</td>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012/2013</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013/2014</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studies</td>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012/2013</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013/2014</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>Academic Papers</td>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013/2014</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Reports</td>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>289</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012/2013</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>223</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013/2014</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>240</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Academic staff reports are generated at the end of each calendar year

Publishing activity of the academic staff remains stable. At the same time, there are no indications of its being on the increase. Over the period in question each lecturer has published an average of 0.52 papers and 1 report. Structurally, academic reports remain of the highest importance, followed by academic papers. It has been established that the academic staff undervalues the academic study as a research project and rarely uses this type of publication.

The unconvincing performance of academic staff when it comes to the number of published works is only one part of the problem. The other is clearly stated in the National Strategy for Scientific Research Development. It claims that there is limited publishing activity for journals included in the global scientometric systems of indexing, referencing and rating. Such publications are considered to make research and researchers recognisable, which in turn leads to both traceability of achievements and increasing the university's prestige through more publications, higher impact factor and impact ranking and more referencing of their work. This problem is also relevant to the publishing activity of the University of Economics - Varna. Moreover, publish-
5. Scientific Events at Varna University of Economics

A traditional and important form for practising scientific research at the University of Economics - Varna are the organised research forums. They create opportunities for promoting research results, developing the scientific discourse and criticism and making publications and professional contacts. These forums include events such as university, faculty, department conferences, round tables, discussions, conferences of young researchers, student conferences, public discussions of research work, open lectures etc.

At the heart of the scientific life of the university are the two university conferences. The first one was titled “Trends and Challenges in Economic Development”. It attracted nearly 300 presenters from 15 countries. The director of the Economic Research Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences prof. M. Dimitrov, prof. S. Vachkov PhD and prof. D. Radilov PhD all gave plenary reports. The second conference had the topic of “Economics in a Changing World: National, Regional, Global Perspectives”, with 200 presenters taking part. The head of the Bulgarian representation of EC Ognyan Zlatev, prof. Z. Mladenova PhD and Georgi Naidenov all gave plenary reports.

Reputable scientific conferences were organised also by the primary branches of the university. Firstly, attention should be given to the persistence with which internationally-attended conferences are organised on the topic of “Construction Entrepreneurship and Real Estate” by the Economics and Construction Management department. The Marketing department also organised a conference with international guests on “Marketing – reality and future projections”. The Accounting department held an applied-research conference with international participants on “Quality and Usefulness of Accounting Information” and a research conference on “Problems in Accounting, Analysis and Control Education”. The Economics and Commerce Management department organised a jubilee international conference on “Regional and Global Perspectives on Commerce”. Another jubilee international conference was organised by the Economics and Industry Management department. To mark the year of statistics the Statistics department put on an international research conference on “Statistics as Science, Education, Career, Activity”. The department of Commodities Science organised an international conference on “Commodities Science – Tradition and Relevance”. The department of Philosophical Sciences organised an international conference on “Social Science and Globalisation”. Another international conference
took place on the topic of “IT in Business and Education” organised by the Informatics department.

It has now become a tradition to organise yearly collaborative conferences with the Herson National Technical University. Also, part of the established programme of events have become the joint conferences with national science organisations such as the Union of Scientists, Regional Organisation of Science and Technical Professionals, Economics Research Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and others. There were also two conferences for young scientists.

Students have an active role in the organisation and the running of research events. A review of student research activity takes place each year for students from all degree programmes, clustered in 20 science units. The Students' Research Conference in May comes as the natural end of the review. It offers a real opportunity for students to participate outside the lecture halls and to compare their knowledge and achievements with those of other colleagues, to exchange research and professional ideas, to develop their presentation and discussion skills. The Finance club regularly organises various discussions, for which it invites distinguished economists as guest lecturers. Aside from the research conferences and discussions, the students of the University of Economics – Varna regularly take part in mathematics, coding, marketing and micro-economics Olympiads and others.

6. Academic staff and PhD programmes

One of the major factors underpinning the research activity at University of Economics – Varna is the members of its faculty. Therefore, their development is a continuous task of vital importance to the Academic Board. As part of their efforts a number of measures have been taken to improve the conditions for promotion of academic staff, as well as encourage additional motivation through higher academic posts. As a result, the structure and quality of publishing activity has drastically improved, as has the participation of staff in projects and research events etc. The balanced reproduction of the academic staff has been achieved in line with the current at the time Academic Staff Development Act. Over the given period 16 lecturers have been conferred the title of 'professor', 36 – 'associate professor' and 69 have become 'assistant professor' and 'senior assistant professor'.

Following the trends in the educational services market, the number of academic staff has been gradually decreasing from 261 people in the beginning of the period to 245 people at its end. Similarly, there is a trend of lowering the number of academic and lecturer staff from 291 to 271 people. Despite the marked trend, unlike other universities, the structure of the academic staff at University of Economics – Varna does not deviate from the adopted standard of 20:30:50. It is worth pointing out, however,
that the age composition of the academic staff is not positive. The average age is still too high, both in total and according to academic posts. It is therefore necessary over the next mandate to not only adopt measures for improving the quality of the faculty, but also for quicker development and lowering its average age.

One of the key educational services of the University of Economics – Varna is the preparation of PhD students. It aims to produce highly qualified practitioners for scientific work or business practice as per the standards of the leading higher education institutions in the world. On the one hand, the University of Economics – Varna considers the education of PhD students and their dissertations to be a core part of the integral research activity of the university. On the other hand, individuals who successfully defended their PhD theses are viewed as an additional source of bringing in fresh blood to the academic staff, which makes PhD degrees an object of interest for the Academic Board.

The Academic Board has therefore put in a lot of effort into developing the educational environment for PhD students. Through the project “Quality in PhD and Post-doc Education – Social Responsibility of Universities and Business” 50 PhD students receive funding, access to databases of papers and data, specially purchased literature at their request, a dedicated study space for PhD students etc. The University has also adopted Rules for Terms and Procedures in Awarding Academic Titles and Academic Posts and a Standard for Division of Activities. Based on these documents the educational materials for PhD students have been revised and standardized. A successful campaign of doctoral programmes accreditation has also been completed. This has led to the increase of accredited doctoral programmes in University of Economics – Varna from 12 to 15 in 5 different spheres.

Over the mandate period (2011 – 2015), there has been a steady upward trend in terms of number of applicants and PhD students. As a result, for the period in question there has been an almost three-fold increase in the number of PhD students. At the moment of writing their total number is 123, with 71 full-time, 28 part-time and 21 in self-study mode. Over the same period there have been 50 successfully defended dissertations. However, work needs to be done in at least several directions. A targeted campaign for doctoral applications and accreditation of new doctoral programmes are just a few of them.

and University library

A basic tool for sharing and announcing the results of the research activity is the output of the University Publishing House “Science and Economics” – the Izvestiya magazine, the University of Economics – Varna Yearbook and Monograph library
“Prof. Ts. Kalyandzhiev”. During the previous period considerable efforts were spent on improving the editions and raising their academic profile. Improvements have also been made to the rules for editorial boards. A major step in the development of the scientific publications is their online format presentation.

The main focus of developing the scientific publications fell on the Izvestiya magazine. During the period in question, a number of organisational events took place to do with the editorial board and the standards of leading scientific magazines of the world. A double anonymous review process and a standardised referencing and bibliography system were introduced. Another decision established a parallel English-language edition of the magazine with its own ISSN number. As a result the Izvestiya magazine was included in indexing systems. As of 2015 the magazine is being indexed in the scientometric databases RePEc and CiteFactor. It is also being indexed in Google Scholar. Its inclusion in EconLit, Global Impact Factor and others is under way.

The University Library has established itself as an environment that fosters the development of research activity at University of Economics – Varna. Over the recent years it has been completely renovated and modernised as part of the 'Integrated Project for Improving the Conditions for Educational Services Provision'. The modernisation involved a complete architectural renovation of the library, new furniture, air-conditioning and ventilation, restructuring of the reading room holdings, opening up full access for taking home of all books, automated spots for self-service, new contactless library cards, a substantial increase in the computers for self-study, self-service copy machines, work station for visually impaired readers, software and technical facilities for the digitalisation of the holdings with a robotic scanner, etc.

Efforts have been made for academic staff to have access to global databases of publications. Contracts for the use of EBSCO Business Source Complete, Encyclopedia Britannica, the business collection of JSTOR (Journal Storage – The Scholarly Archive), Passport GMID (Global Market Information Database) of Euromonitor International, the Management collection of Emerald have all been extended. Also available during the period were some of the richest information resource bases - ISI Web of Knowledge, Science Direct and Scopus. For the academic staff over different time frames there was access to full-text bases such as Taylor & Francis online, Press Reader, CRCnetBASE, SAGE Humanities and Social Science Package and CABI.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

University of Economics – Varna is an institution whose main purpose is to provide knowledge, research, scientific analyses, innovative solutions etc. In particular, science and research need to be business-oriented, to have practical application and to
add value to the economy. The afore-mentioned activities lead to the conclusion that the work for the period in question does correspond to this goal and the main and specific tasks of the mandate programme have been achieved. Different forms for realisation of research projects have been developed to serve the university and the business. The university library, access to e-libraries and databases have achieved a higher level of information provision for the research activities. The reputation of the university academic publications is improving and so is their quality and the different forms of access. There is also a qualitative enhancement of the doctoral education through developing and accreditation of doctoral programmes, introducing a credit system, improving the learning and research environment through European projects etc. Serious efforts have been deployed to update the regulatory base in terms of research activity, academic staff development and doctoral programmes. Last but not least, the tradition of organising series of scientific events has been strengthened, thus establishing the university's role in both the research and educational world.

However, a series of measures are needed to further improve research activities and the development of academic staff. This follows from the university funding principles adopted by the Higher Education Development Strategy, and specifically the additional funding received by universities which demonstrate higher quality. During the next mandate focus will be directed to the provision of adequate research infrastructure in accordance with the goals of the strategy and the necessity of placing research at the heart of the university's activity. A research institute with a structural unit status as per the Higher Education Act is needed. It would provide the synergy to unite the efforts of the research centres created during the previous term.

The newly established institute would provide research, consultancy, application and promotional services in the sphere of social, economic and legal sciences, as well as in mathematics and informatics. The aim is for the institute to functionally integrate research in various areas of scientific knowledge, to strengthen the links with other academic and scientific organisations both locally and internationally and to broaden contacts with businesses, so that the role of science in social development is enhanced.

Next, the regulatory base for filling academic positions needs to be streamlined, so that higher quality and steady flow can be achieved in the reproduction of faculty members. The updated Rules for Terms and Procedures in Awarding Academic Titles and Academic Posts and the related documents need to be adapted to the unified national minimum criteria stated in the Higher Education Development Strategy in Bulgaria.

In relation to the goals set by the Higher Education Development Strategy and the National Strategy for Development of Scientific Research, the Regulations on teachers employment and payroll need to be revised. The principle of 'salary is formed solely on teaching activity' needs adapting. Instead, there should be a 're-
search activity results' component in the methodology for salary formation. Of special significance in determining the amount of salary should be publishing in editions in the American scientometric system by Thomson Reuters - Web of Science/Knowledge and the European scientometric system by Elsevier - SCOPUS. This requirement follows from the adopted rating system for universities whereby scientific are only those papers which are indexed and referenced in the above-mentioned systems.

Given the serious competition on the educational services market for Bachelor and Master degrees, the university needs to place a special focus on PhD students and conditions for attracting international PhD applicants. Further work is needed in several directions. Firstly, organising a targeted campaign for PhD applications, both informational and promotional. This would include preparing and disseminating information materials in Bulgarian, English, German and Russian and establishing contacts with organisations who work in recruitment of international PhD applicants etc. Secondly, more active recruitment is needed among the students graduating with distinction through explaining the benefits and advantages of a PhD degree. Thirdly, developing and accreditation for new doctoral programmes with the potential of attracting more PhD applicants.

Over the next mandate priority should be given to the University Publishing House and the improvement of the quality of its publishing output, to conform to leading international standards. Specifically this can be achieved by preparation for and inclusion in indexing systems of the University of Economics – Varna Yearbook and Monographs library 'Prof. Ts. Kalyandzhiev'.The Izvestiya magazine needs further work in terms of content and publishing, so that it can achieve the standards for applying and inclusion in scientometric referencing systems such as SCOPUS, EBSCO and others. The process of transforming the University Library into a study and research centre needs to continue. Its institutional framework is the project of digitalisation of the library catalogue, which has just started.

Developing research and its connection to the educational process are of crucial importance to building a knowledge-based economy and society. Achieving the aims and goals of research will facilitate the effective integration of the university within the European science family and will turn it into an active and competitive partner of European research and innovation networks. Sustained effort in developing research will create the conditions and environment for quality research and a young generation of scientists. The University of Economics – Varna has the potential to face the challenges of today. All that is required is the united efforts of the academic board, primary units and the academic staff for achieving the ambitious goals it has set forward.
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RESEARCH ACTIVITY AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA: STATE AND PERSPECTIVES

Prof. Veselin Hadzhiev PhD

Abstract

This paper looks at the research activity at University of Economics – Varna over the period 2011-2015. It presents the results of the completed science projects, the organised events and the published research works. It also highlights the direction for future development of research activity as per the Higher Education Development Strategy and the National Strategy for Scientific Research.