Introduction and General Aspects

This report is based on our discussions with various staff, student, and stakeholder groups of VID Specialized University as well as reflections on observations. There was an open and positive engagement during all our interviews. We would like to thank all involved groups for their warm welcome, openness and valuable contributions.

The report is not an evaluation of the university’s quality of scientific work or teaching, but serves as an outside perspective on the development of the University with a specific focus on its strategy and values. It is not all encompassing but highlights those aspects that were most visible to the advisory board.

Overall, we observed general satisfaction and a very positive spirit among staff and international students (national students were not interviewed). The leadership of the University identifies highly with its value base and strategic goals. This important commitment is a great resource but needs to continue to be nourished. The merger processes seem to have been handled in a respectful and effective way. The representatives from smaller colleges who were interviewed indicated that they were treated in an egalitarian way in relation to larger units without evidence of domination of other institutions. People seem to focus on opportunities created by the merger, which reflects outstanding leadership and support for the process. A great deal has been achieved in a short time. However, this energy may not be sustainable, and ongoing workload needs to be monitored to avoid burnout.

VID’s strategy is clearly linked to its value base. The values outlined in the mission statement and strategy paper are consistent. The articulated values are general and abstract and are visible more specifically in programs, research groups etc. They are specifically enacted through profile courses about values and relationships (life views, values in professional practice) in every level of educational programming and are very valuable. Nevertheless, there are many ways in which one can discuss how the values are enacted at VID: (1) in a more general, abstract sense, raising awareness of the different value traditions and how they relate to specific traditions or (2) in a content-based sense related to one’s tradition, displaying and favoring a specific set of values. The leadership seems to favor the more general sense of values, however it is important that they be understood not as either/or, but as complementary.

There is a risk, in a growing university, of losing touch with its traditional set of values and focusing more on the general side of values, since this is easier in dealing with differing and perhaps conflicting value traditions. This leads to the question: which values are non-negotiable for VID and should permeate its strategy and all programs? This question will become more prominent as VID grows; usually, the bigger a university gets, the more diverse are its stakeholder groups and represented interests. Why would VID like to become a “regular” university instead of a “specialized” university? What strategies will be undertaken to maintain its distinctive values which are a key interest of its church-based stakeholders when adding new colleges beyond the present ones? In organizational studies, it has been noted that organizations become less attached to their value base as they get bigger because other issues like management, budget, and stakeholder issues require more attention (cf. Marshall B. Jones, The Multiple Sources of Mission Drift, in: nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 36/2007, 2, 299-307; Carmen Nobel, How „Hybrid“ Nonprofits Can Stay on Mission, in: Harvard Business School Working Knowledge 10.2011; Michael Meyer/Johannes Leitner, Warnung: Zuviel Management kann Ihre NPO zerstören. Managerialismus und seine Folgen
Similarly, the focus on practice-based research should be preserved when new colleges are added. The IAB has spoken primarily with the leadership of VID. It is not entirely clear how the staff perceive the changes. It will be important to continue to engage both staff and owners in the planning for and evolution of the organization to maintain the momentum.

Faculty of Social Studies

The faculty ranks among the top 3 faculties in Norway in social work and has unique programs like family therapy. Many of its students are practitioners in field work (600 out of 850 students), highlighting the high relevance of the practical research being done. The Faculty of Social Studies has a 10 year strategy for research development that includes the provision of time for staff with PhDs to publish in research journals and for staff without PhDs to conduct applied and practical projects.

Reflections:

- The faculty complement is being strengthened. Currently there are 3 full professors out of 34 fulltime equivalent academic staff, and 12 teachers without PhDs. There have been opportunities to recruit new professors who are close to completing their PhD.
- Future consideration could be given to strategies to strengthen the international outreach of the faculty, but this is particularly challenging when programs are offered only in Norwegian.
- Specific activities to attract more male students are encouraged, even though this is also a national question. However, this may pay off in more male candidates for staff positions in the long run.
- The interdisciplinary work is based on the value profile and student’s field work. The development of new (practical) cross-disciplinary/interdisciplinary solutions is recommended in order to prepare for ongoing social changes. It may be supported by offering common courses with the nursing programs (which is not possible at present because of lack of adequately sized classrooms). Also, it might be important to integrate courses on civil participation in nursing and social work programs.

Faculty of Health Studies

Faculty members in Health Studies are engaged in broad areas of research, some clinical and others more community/socially oriented. There are two large nationally funded research projects. Strong international collaboration exists with other Scandinavian countries (for example in mental health). International collaboration is evident through strong networks for students going abroad to other countries.

Reflections:

- The merger of 4 campus sites into 2 is a major challenge.
- Another significant challenge is the redevelopment of the nursing curriculum, from four separate undergraduate programs to one curriculum. This is an important opportunity to offer an innovative educational program that addresses societal needs in the context of a value-based curriculum and the standards of the nursing profession. There are also
opportunities to streamline courses, offer interdisciplinary courses, and save costs. However, careful planning and attention to change processes will require significant time and resources. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

- One more challenge is to link the study programs to research groups. Are there programs that link staff in hospitals and colleges with VID?
- The majority of students are nursing students. How are the (international) dynamics on nursing/globalization/global citizenship issues reflected in the program? What is the strategic focus in education and research programs on nursing? This has not become clear.
- A PhD program in nursing should be considered for the future. There is an international shortage and great demand for nursing scholars and researchers. Nursing students also comprise 3 out of 4 students at VID. Thus, a PhD with interdisciplinary elements would complement the existing programs and provide nursing students the full range of academic education.

Reflections on both faculties:

- The leadership of the faculties has taken on the value-based identity of VID in a serious and conscious way. Ongoing reflection on how the values are reflected in the programs may be useful. It may be helpful to regularly ask how the specific research and teaching programs are based on these values. There may be a benefit to a clear statement to address explicitly what is meant with regard to value-based education and practice. Are there any conflicts in values between the religious and secular sphere and how students are taught to navigate these?
- Commercialization and the role of private enterprises may become more prominent in the future. How will this change the respective fields of work? What advantages and disadvantages can be seen in an entrepreneurial approach? How is this to be reflected in research and teaching?
- There could be more deliberate and strategic efforts to be engaged globally, especially in the global south. The challenge might be to focus on fewer countries and to develop deeper relationships in specific countries and institutions abroad.

Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies

The Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies has a strong standing in the fields of missiology, diaconia and theology. There has been a strong history and outstanding collaboration especially with African, but also with Asian countries. The values fit well with the VID strategy and value base (humanity locally and globally).

Reflections:

- There are some distinct differences between the two PhD programs and despite the small size, there may be strategic advantages to keep both. VID needs to have four PhD programs in order to become a regular university, so it may be reasonable to keep the two programs as they are for the time being. (An alternative would be to make one PhD program out of the two, with four to five distinct thematic specializations in it, for example in diaconia, missiology, theology and disability studies, nursing)
- What about a linkage of disability studies with theology and diaconia? Disability studies open a set of topics like human rights/global health/social justice/international relations,
citizenship issues across the research groups and PhD projects. This might be a unifying value/topic to mobilize a wide variety of initiatives, serving communities in Norway and the global south, offering opportunities to recruit people with disability. This may also offer new funding opportunities.

- Along this line, consideration could be given to a new PhD program which is interdisciplinary and focuses on disability, social health and solidarity. Such a program could pull together ethics in humanity, philosophical and theological traditions, and medical approaches. There are already 2 well-known professors of disability studies at VID. It will be important to include people from the global south since disability is also a challenge in the south as in the north. Perhaps there could be use of concepts to bring together three rather distinctive elements – health, values and religion (“care” fits in with concepts like inclusion, care and humanity/ethics/values). Such a program would provide an opportunity to recruit more PhD students with disabilities. A program in disability studies may also lead to new funding sources.

Research Groups and Research Strategy

Research groups are a great instrument to foster research in an interdisciplinary way across the faculties. There are 15 research groups at present with differing topics and outlooks creating a supportive environment for PhD students. This variety is viewed as a strength, especially the linkage of master programs to the research groups.

Reflections:

- First and foremost, VID is challenged to implement a way of prioritizing research groups. Not all 15 research groups can be at the top (international) level. It is recommended that a process be developed to establish institutional research priorities. This does not restrict or preclude faculty members from pursuing other areas of research, but will enable VID to focus on developing several specific areas of strength. To ensure success, faculty members need to be involved in developing criteria and the implementation of these signature areas. Clearly, some of the criteria need to be linked to VID’s values and mission.

- Given the research strategy to enhance the research profile of VID, there should be further reflection on how to support and strengthen research development outside of PhD programs. This includes the question of how to support those who have not yet obtained research grants: by mentorship, advising, additional graduate student support, small research grants, literature searches etc.

- Although some research groups have reflected upon how their research focus is linked to the value base of VID, this was not visible in all presentations. This raised questions about how to foster discussions of values in research and whether there is a tension between local values and global values. A question was raised whether (all) dissertations embed a discussion on values.

- Include the important work being done in humanities disciplines across VID. This will help bring forward a truly interdisciplinary disability studies initiative across VID drawing from humanities, social science, and science disciplinary perspectives and methods. People with
disabilities are at every life stage and every group (i.e., intersectional, cross-cutting identities).

- There should be ongoing discussion about the impact of research. What kind of impact is to be achieved? How can impact be measured? What kind of “proof” of impact exists? How can this be communicated to VID stakeholders and to the public/society?
- There may be an opportunity for people from the (practice) community to be involved in research groups, e.g., care of elderly – are some of the staff from elderly homes part of research projects? This could foster knowledge translation, dissemination, and cross-fertilization between research and practice.
- What kind of research is needed for developing and evaluating new programs/new curricula?
- How can VID support research groups when applying for research funds?
- Does VID have PhD students from other continents? How many PhD students are from the global south? What strategies can be used to attract international PhD students, for example from the global south? This will be important for future international networks. A way to support this may be summer schools on specific themes to which international PhD students are invited together senior and junior researches. There is an increasing number of people in the global south who are financing their studies abroad in even more expensive schools than VID. While financing might be considered for some, marketing for prospective students who find their own funding from the global south must also be more strongly pursued.
- Internationalization should work also in the other direction: How can more study time abroad be available for PhD students? It may prove helpful to focus on partnerships with a few outstanding international universities to accomplish this goal.
- Is there an issue with career opportunities for PhD students? Is the number of PhD students equivalent to open positions in academia? What are the other career opportunities for graduates of PhD programs, especially outside of academia? Or is there an implicit ethical issue of oversupply of PhD graduates?
- Will the interdisciplinary nature of VID PhD programs create a barrier for graduates seeking academic positions in specific departments/disciplines? This may be an issue for some disciplines such as nursing.

**Academic Support / Administrative Support**

Administration has become more efficient since the merger. There is more standardization, duplication is avoided, and, quality of teaching and research is measured and monitored. There has been greater collaboration across the various campus sites and faculty programs. The focus is on professionalism, quality and collaboration among faculties and less hierarchical relationships.

Reflections:

- What is the capacity of research administration for research projects and project management?
- What is the strategy for digitalization/eLearning programs/life long learning? There is strength in e-learning with residential components, for example in social work. We note that eLearning is Important for people with disabilities, given challenges associated with travel and relocation.
International students/International Program

VID has a specific and attractive profile for international students. It offers a warm welcoming holistic environment, focused on diaconia/Christian social work, empowering people and addressing their needs.

Reflections:

- What are the strategic aims for international collaboration?
- Is there a program for international visiting professors? In order to attract international guest/visiting professors, language may be a barrier unless courses are offered in English. Living conditions are also important (housing, schooling, transport, insurance etc.) The administration should appoint one person from the organization as a contact person for guest professors. This person could be responsible for facilitating the transition of the visiting professor. This would be in addition to linkage to a counter-part from a faculty in order to foster collaborative research and teaching activities.
- A systematic development of partnerships with European and cross continental universities, networks of diaconal organisations, and other producers of welfare services would be recommended particularly with aims for fostering research and learning on social innovation.
- VID should ensure that its website and social media platforms are available in English for international students and visitors. It was suggested that English translation be available during orientation week and in chapel. There should be more opportunities for international students to socialize with Norwegian students (international ones are separated from them for the most part).
- International students are not used to web-based education. There is a need for an introduction to it. It should also be an explicit requirement that international students have a personal computer. They should consider this in planning for their programs.
- There is complexity with regard to the implementation of any international program. Pragmatic challenges include organizing living arrangements for international students (including family). What additional supports do VID international students need to close the gap between intentions and implementation?

Board of VID

Some topics for consideration by the Board include:

1. Strategy:
   a. Will VID become a full university or stay as a specialized university? Why?
      Does the board feel that they own the strategy?
      Are the various institutions represented on the Board all committed to the strategy?
      In addition, are they sharing the strategy with others?
      What is the Board’s vision for VID – 5 years from now, 10 years from now?
      What are the values undergirding their vision? How would a change to a “regular” university influence their key values? How would it affect the link to the church?
(2) Why is the church important to VID? What would be missing if there were no link to the church? What can be done to ensure the continuation of a church based linkage in a growing university?

(3) Does VID have a fundraising strategy to complement government funding? Question: is there an interest in fundraising activities and strategy?

(4) Recruitment and retention: What are the recruitment and retention plans for the faculties and the students? Some staff might be overworked. Staff has worked hard to get where they are now and they are very committed. Does the staff have enough resources for what VID wants to do? Does the Board provide adequate support? It was reported that salaries at VID were lower than some other universities, and this may be one factor in recruiting qualified employees.

(5) Given the ambitious strategy, do the owners of VID have a plan or willingness for further investment? Does the structure of ownership (5 owners) needs to be changed? What is the infrastructure for further growth?

(6) What are the research strengths of VID that should be promoted? What fields and studies should be prioritized to attain ambitions to be at the top level? How can research groups or goals be prioritized?

(7) Governance and Innovation: Is there consistency between the governance and the operational levels? What is the governance perspective on values?

(8) What is VID’s vision for internationalization and global engagement? What role can VID realistically take on?