Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities

GEORGE BACOVIA UNIVERSITY

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of George Bacovia University, Bacău. The evaluation took place in February and May 2014 in the framework of the project "Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities", which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

The evaluations are performed within the context of major reforms in the Romanian higher education system, and specifically in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education and the various related normative acts.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of an overall reform, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

1.1 The Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It concentrates upon:

- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management

- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2. George Bacovia University's profile

The university was formed in 1992 by the academic, social and cultural foundation "George Bacovia" by academics from the region's public sector universities. From that date, the university underwent a number of broadenings of its disciplinary portfolio and changes to its academic structure until most recently contracting that portfolio and structure. "George Bacovia" was accredited in 2002.

The university is situated in the City of Bacău in the County of Bacău in the region of Moldavia to the North-East of Romania. The City of Bacău is some 130 kms from the regional capital, Iaşi. Its local economy is both agricultural and industrial. The City has a population of over 130,000 inhabitants and the County of over 610,000 inhabitants.

The university is a private higher education institution and, in the context of the classification of higher education institutions under the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education, is included amongst the teaching and learning universities.

It sees itself as a regional university and part of the national higher education system and describes its overall mission as:

- "the initial training and improvement of highly qualified specialists in the areas of real interest for Romania and the European Union economy, administration and law, fully complying with the National Qualifications Framework;

- supporting an extensive scientific research both for teaching purposes and in order to solve complex theoretical and practical problems;

- engaging the academic community in actions asserting national culture and its integration into the universal culture;

- cultivating humanistic values and promote fundamental rights, dedication to national values and appreciation of the historical past and traditions of the Romanian people."

The overall mission is supplemented by more detailed teaching and learning, "didactic", and "scientific" research missions.

The university has a five-year strategic plan covering, amongst other areas, teaching and learning, research, partnerships that are underpinned by plans in relation to quality, teaching and learning, research, partnerships, IT, human resources, finance and capital investment. However, two recurrent themes in the university's discussions with the team, which transcend that strategic plan, were the need to retrench in order to manage the sharp downturn in student recruitment and the probably unfulfillable desire for eligibility to access state funding.

1.3.   The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a working group of six academic staff and one student, appointed by the rector. The academic staff were selected to offer a range of knowledge and experience of different levels of the university's structure and governance and management bodies.

The working group operated throughout the second half of 2013, meeting weekly and consulting the broader university community, gathering data and evidence via the intranet and a cross-university meeting of academic staff. This process was supplemented by local-level discussion.

The working group began the process by drafting a SWOT analysis. A draft report with appendices was discussed during a meeting of academic staff before being posted for formative comment by the broader university community on the intranet. The rector reported that staff had actively engaged with the process: for example, by adding factors to the SWOT analysis. The submitted version of the self-evaluation report was also posted on the intranet.

The report was concise but more descriptive than analytical. Minimal supplementary appendices were provided to support the report, but with basic trend information on overall budgets, staffing profile and student recruitment omitted. The university did, however, respond positively to the evaluation team's requests to supply other additional documentation.

A further complication arose in that the university mistakenly uploaded some of those additional requested appendices supplied in Romanian. The evaluation team had to accept some documentation in Romanian but did request the translation of certain key documents into English. Again, the university responded positively to those requests.

The report together with appendices was sent to the evaluation team via an electronic platform in January 2014. The two visits of the evaluation team took place from 19 to 21 February 2014 and from 13 to 15 May 2014, respectively. In between the visits, the university provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Winfried B Mueller – Chair, former Rector, University of Klagenfurt, Austria
- Lennart Olausson – former Vice-Chancellor, University of Malmo, Sweden
- Asnate Kažoka* - Student, Riga Technical University, Latvia
- Gregory Clark – Team Coordinator, Associate Secretary, University of Salford, United Kingdom

* Ms Kažoka was unable to attend the first visit because of unforeseen circumstances.

The team thanks the Rector, Professor Tatiana Puiu, the Chair of the Board of Directors, Professor Toader Gherasim, and all staff and students at George Bacovia University for their engagement with the evaluation process and, in particular, Ms Nicoleta Botez, for her supportive and helpful contribution to the evaluation process as institutional contact person.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

George Bacovia University comprises a single faculty offering seven undergraduate programmes (to over 600 students) and six postgraduate programmes (to over 250 students). The university has retrenched in the recent past from three and then from two faculties and has suspended student recruitment in certain programmes because of a demographic and economic downturn. The university is in a state of transition. Significant changes as well as improvements have recently been carried out: new building and dedicated facilities, implementation of the Bologna Process, introduction of quality assurance, reduction of size of Senate and new organisational structures.

The reduction of the number of faculties in the last three years does not reflect any clear strategy beside the probable effect of saving costs for deans and Faculty Councils. Those changes resulted from a financial analysis jointly by the Board of Directors and the rector and subsequent approval by Senate. The actual solution, with only one faculty of just over 30 academic staff, the Faculty of Economical, Juridical and Administrative Sciences, has the disadvantage that the visibility of the former Faculty of Law and Public Administration has diminished significantly, despite the fact that its organisational structure continues informally. As Law is the most attractive programme for student recruitment, the merger into one faculty could have negative consequences on student numbers in law education. Moreover, the team does not see the benefit of a one-faculty structure. If the institution really wanted to simplify the structure as well as show innovation to other small Romanian universities, it could have abolished the faculty level completely and given the duties and rights of the dean and the Faculty Council to the rector and the Senate.

Executive management is provided by a rector, elected by all academic staff and those student representatives on the Senate. The rector is assisted by senior academic postholders including the dean, the director of the Didactic and Research Department and the director of the Distance Learning / Part-time Department.

With the implementation of the 2011 Law, the size of the Senate has been reduced and its functions have been newly defined. The Senate consists of seven members, which is an appropriate size in order to make decisions quickly, but its power is restricted to purely academic affairs. The university took the opportunity when implementing the 2011 Law to transfer all financial decisions from the Senate to the Board of Directors.

The university's implementation of structural reforms according to the 2011 Law are only partial and do not align with a modern university managerial structure. The rector is restricted to teaching and learning and research responsibilities. The Senate has no financial power. The rector is invited to be in attendance at Senate, which meets monthly but is not a member and therefore has no vote. The university is managed by the Board of Directors, which consists of three members representing the university's founders. This Board decides

and performs all financial operations, controls human resources and takes decisions concerning new study programmes or the cessation of activities and programmes. This is reflected in the organisation chart where the rector is positioned on a level beneath the Board of Directors and the Senate, although the current rector believed her views were taken into account. The team found it significant that the current rector was also expected to discharge a full teaching load. The actual organisation and distribution of power does not separate executive agendas and legislative agendas. In reality, all the power is given to the Board of Directors, of which the rector is not a member. As a consequence, there is insufficient authority and power for the rector and the Senate in order to perform their duties according to the 2011 Law.

The student voice' is facilitated by guaranteed student representative membership on Senate and Faculty Council.

The Strategic Plan 2013-2016 exemplifies the university's organisational structure and decision-making process with the Board of Directors retaining executive authority. University staff reported that they had found the process for self-evaluation to have been more comprehensive and inclusive than the university's standard strategic planning processes.

The university has a good grasp, through its strategic planning and intelligence gathering, of the several significant strategic challenges faced: demographic downturn, high immigration, high unemployment, dependency on a very small number of feeder institutions, ineligibility to draw down state funding, expenditure exceeding income. The team was, however, unable to identify where the university articulated clear strategies (underpinned by operational plans showing locus of responsibility, timescale and key performance indicators) to address those challenges. Strategic and operational planning do not appear well-embedded in the university's culture. The university's financial position also meant that financial resources for investment in new initiatives were limited. Operational planning, such as it was, was monitored by the rector's annual report to Senate.

The team detected a level of optimism at the university despite the recent and current adverse strategic challenges. The university community was confident that the perceived quality of its offer (which it expected to be externally better acknowledged after a visit by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ARACIS, in May 2014), improved marketing, the recommencement of currently dormant programmes, greater external sponsorship and the arguably unrealistic wish that some element of state funding might be opened up to private institutions, would offer the university the opportunity to stabilise, to eliminate its financial deficit and to reach previous levels. The team, whilst welcoming the optimistic approach of the university, believed that this was in itself insufficient, especially as the university had had to budget for repeated annual deficits, unless that optimism were backed up by clear, targeted and realistic strategic and operational plans.

The team saw little evidence of networking and intelligence gathering to assess how similar strategic challenges had been addressed at other private and/or small institutions. The team heard very little about the university's exploration of strategic partnerships and alliances to work together with other providers to address challenges to mutual benefit.

The university's support services, which are overseen by an administrative director, are transitional in nature and comprise a number of often, single person, specific administrative units. Those units concentrated on administering processes and supplying statistical, financial and other support information and did not appear to have any advisory functions in relation to strategic decision-making.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Reconsider the organisational structure but within the national legislative framework. The Board of Directors should withdraw from the executive management of the institution and leave the management to a strong Rectorate and a responsibly acting Senate. The Board of Directors should define only the general framework and monitor the managers of the institution.

- Re-establish the Law Faculty or eliminate the faculty level altogether.

- Strengthen strategic and operational planning so as to address current challenges.

- Identify benchmarks and performance indicators for strategic and operational planning, drawn from comparable institutions.

3. Teaching and Learning

The university's overall teaching and learning mission is "to train specialists…in various fields of knowledge and socio-economic practice", with this mission to be delivered by goals including:

- continuous improvement of curricula
- creating a suitable learning environment for the acquisition of knowledge and skills so as to meet labour market requirements
- improvement of learning resources
- continuous improvement of staff
- involvement with stakeholders
- development of complementary, commercial training
- integration into the national, European and international higher education community

The team found the university to be broadly consistent with the Bologna Process. It offers programmes in the first two of the three higher education cycles. The university uses the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and recognises foreign qualifications for admission and advanced standing. The student body had a reasonable awareness of the university's approach to student learning through mechanisms such as learning outcomes, a modular structure and clear assessment criteria. The students whom the team met described assessment and other feedback as helpful and generally timely, although sometimes only made available when requested.

The university's approach to the Bologna Process was one of compliance with national initiatives, including ARACIS requirements. Minimal mention was made in the self-evaluation report or in the team's discussions with staff of a focus upon student-centred learning. Similarly, no awareness or direct application was shown of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance beyond a background understanding that they were embedded within internal and national documentation.

The team was informed that the university operated appropriate systems for the approval, amendment, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes, through the single faculty and Senate, in a manner consistent with the defined and detailed requirements of ARACIS. The team was impressed by the obvious engagement of the university's committed teaching staff with their academic disciplines.

Nevertheless, the external ranking (classification) of study programmes, in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law, had placed the majority of the university's study programmes in the lower classifications. The team did not share the university's general acceptance of that classification as almost inevitable because of factors outside the university's control such as either their newness as programmes, a perceived skewing in the classification methodology and the university's research standing. The team would have expected to see greater

emphasis in the university's strategic planning on the aim to improve the ranking of study programmes, and for this aim to be operationalised and monitored. For example, the university did not demonstrate any mechanism by which good practice in higher ranked programmes was disseminated cross-university to enhance practice in lower ranked programmes.

The university reported that they were hampered in the diversification of the academic portfolio not only by low levels of recruitment but also by what they regarded as unfair (because of public universities' ability to draw down state funding) competition from regional state universities in disciplines originally first offered at the university.

There were also national restrictions on permissible programme titles and combinations so that the university was not able to develop innovative combinations of disciplines at undergraduate level, say, niche combinations of law and business and/or finance. However, greater specialisation was permissible at taught postgraduate level, although the university was not confident that a sufficient market existed in law at Master's level because of varying professional requirements in different branches of law. The team, however, believed that, subject to future accreditation, the creation of such niche programmes should be considered.

Nevertheless, the team would have welcomed evidence of the university's exploration of strategic partnerships and alliances with other state and private institutions on integrated feeder provision, perhaps with the university recruiting to the first and/or second year of programmes before completion elsewhere, say, in the regional capital, the city of Iași. This could assist local students to study initially in Bacău and enable the university to offer programmes in fields in which it did not have the full teaching competence.

Similarly, the university reported that the scope for commercial short courses was restricted because of competition from a range of providers, including the Chamber of Commerce, who could better draw down state and European funding.

The university was similarly downbeat in relation to the greater use of alternative modes of candidature and especially distance learning, despite the nomination of a senior academic postholder to lead in this area. The university's use of blended learning and its virtual learning environment was minimal in support of its standard campus delivered provision and the team was offered little evidence of thorough exploration of the feasibility of the university extending into this area. The university did, however, advise that it was considering certain flexibility in its attendance pattern for full-time programmes so as to allow students some opportunity to factor in part-time work to help sustain them financially whilst studying.

The University did not display to the team what strategic consideration, if any, had been given to diversification in terms of foreign language, and especially English language, delivery. Mechanisms were in place for foreign language teaching and support but, again, the team was offered little evidence of thorough explanation of the feasibility of, for example, English

language delivery of at least part of the curriculum to improve graduate employability and to attract foreign students either for full registration or for student exchange.

The university was clearer in its evidence of its emphasis upon vocational and practical education and its commitment to supplementing theoretical knowledge in the curricula with practical applications and skills, whether by simulation through such constructs as the "Legal Clinic" or in the various "laboratories" (teaching rooms themed around specific professions such as a mock courtroom) or by use of placement opportunities or internships with business and industry, for example, with the Police Forensic Service. The university's provision in this area was confirmed by students, alumni and external stakeholders who also praised the university's expertise in preparing students for professional examinations and recruitment competitions. However, placement and other practical opportunities were organised at programme level with some placements of only short duration, and the university should give consideration to strengthening this provision further by making it not merely more consistent in length but also obligatory as an entitlement for all students.

The team discussed with the university the seemingly high programme withdrawal rates, which varied from programme to programme. The university reported that the economic downturn was the key causal factor for withdrawal and outlined efforts made to assist students with financial difficulties. The university argued however that the main impact of the economic downturn was on recruitment rather than retention and suggested that this had been exacerbated by the impact over the last two years of nationally imposed changes to the pass rate for secondary school leaving examinations.

The university was perceived by students as benevolent and supportive and, above all, approachable. Whilst the university offered little in terms of description of personal tutoring, it was clear to the team that the small scale of the institution and good lines of communication with the student body meant that students were confident that they could receive support and advice for financial or pastoral difficulties. Indeed, the team's concern was rather that the students might be overprotected and not sufficiently guided towards self-organisation and the development of self-help and self-reliance competencies. In that same context, the social space, "Student Corners", for group work and the infrastructure for a self-supporting student body was limited. This was magnified in that, again, because of scale, sporting activities, though organised in the university, took place externally as did catering for students. However, there was scope, for modest outlay, to develop existing social facilities in the university building to make them more attractive to students. In part, this matter stemmed from the small scale of the institution, but the result was that the feel was more of a secondary school than a higher education institution.

Overall, the team viewed the university's accommodation as modern, purpose-built and well-suited to the provision delivered. There was a good mix of larger and small spaces with sufficient library and IT provision, although online material was not extensive. Library provision was supplemented by arrangements for access to external additional provision. The

student body were satisfied with the provision available, which included an email account that could be retained even after graduation. They also reported the library to be particularly responsive to their requests for new texts and additional copies and to have available the required electronic material such as legislative updates and reports on national debates, their significance and impact.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Further align with all aspects of the Bologna Process and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (for example, student-centred learning, involvement of stakeholders, internationalisation, employability).

- Operationalise the improvement of the classification of study programmes, for example, improvement from classification "E" to classification "D".

- Consider the greater exploitation of the university's virtual learning environment, including increased use of e-learning for campus-based programmes.

- Reconsider the attractiveness of the study offer and seek to introduce new attractive programmes (for example, interdisciplinary programmes, professional education programmes).

- Consider new study programmes where students study the first or the first two years at the university and conclude their studies in Iași or elsewhere.

- Subject to future accreditation, consider the creation of a Master's programme in law (with a niche emphasis on economics).

- Formalise and extend practical/professional elements in study programmes and introduce student entitlement to obligatory internships.

- Develop "Student Corners" within the university building in order to strengthen self-directed learning of students, group work, discussion and communication within student groups, and social activities.

4. Research

The university's overall research mission is "the solving of…theoretical and practical problems of real interest to beneficiaries…" This approach is then supported by general objectives including:

- collaboration between academic staff
- a research-informed curriculum
- activity within a regional, national and international research context
- maximising the value of research outputs
- publishing research outputs
- developing and training researchers
- promoting national and international cooperation and agreements.

However, the team felt that some of those general objectives were more aspirational than actual and found that research activity was primarily dependent upon the initiative and effort of individual academic staff members.

Firstly, the team could not see how the university prioritised, planned and monitored its research. The team acknowledged that, being classified as a teaching and learning university, there were restrictions on the university's ability to draw down on certain state-resourced or administered funding. However, there was no clear evidence of how the university targeted and systematised bidding for sponsored research, nor of which research disciplinary foci the university had identified as core to its research. Similarly, there was no evidence of a strategic approach to reaching critical mass in research by establishing cooperation with other institutions, thereby also increasing visibility of research outputs.

Secondly, the university admitted that research activity had to be carried out in the cross-university context of a full teaching load, according to appointment status, applying to all academic staff. Many of the staff whom the team met were keen to do research within their subject disciplines not least as this enabled them to meet the requirements of their current appointment status or of possible promotion. However, several acknowledged that this required them to give of their own time as they also had to deliver even more than a full teaching load according to appointment status.

The university and the staff whom the team met both reported that research output was monitored as part of the standard appraisal mechanism but that the monitoring, overseen by the Didactic and Research Department, related to volume of activity rather than to whether the research topic aligned with any university research focus. The team was advised of particular examples of sound staff research but was not provided with the authoritative, quantified evidence of the volume of research so as to be able to see the bigger picture. This left the team in some doubt as to whether the university itself gathered and analysed that research data sufficiently to see that bigger picture.

The university contended that it focused upon research relevant to business and industry but offered minimal evidence to the team of how this was quantified in the context of the proportions it generated of the university's income, how the activity was to be further developed and, within the framework of an operation plan, how the activity was to be supported and monitored. The university was aware that external sponsorship of research by existing external stakeholders could generate additional income for the university but did not demonstrate how that awareness would become reality.

The university had put in place some measures to encourage research including support for staff's doctoral studies and for international exchange and conference opportunities, although, even there, staff sometimes had to resource such opportunities themselves. However, it was unclear to the team what constituted the university's strategic approach to the greater engagement of staff in research through mechanisms such as incentivisation (especially for young researchers); research sabbaticals; encouraging older staff to improve English language competence so as to extend the range of publications and international cooperation opportunities; and establishing bidding teams to write more research proposals.

The university publishes two research journals: one in law and one in economic sciences and contended that these raised the profile of the university as a relatively recent higher education provider. For example, the law journal, which was also published online, was circulated to all national law faculties and had engendered potential research collaborations and contributions from external authors as well as widening the catchment for student recruitment.

The research active staff in law whom the team met emphasised their focus on engaging with practitioner bodies related to criminal and civil law. This would offer the university a niche research area of practitioner focus, would raise the university's profile and would enable the university to keep its law curricula fully up to date. Again, the team could not determine whether this was a bottom up initiative derived by staff consensus or flowed, top down, from a university-led research focus. In the absence of evidence otherwise, the team suggested the former.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Define a university-wide research policy and set research priorities in the context of being a teaching and learning university.

- Systematise support for (especially young) academic staff including the creation of a supportive workload balancing model allowing for both teaching and research.

5. Service to society

The university deployed a wide range of external employers and stakeholders to meet the team in evidence of the high level of interactions and cooperation between the university and both the public and private sectors. The external stakeholders whom the team met expressed not only goodwill towards the university but also an appreciation of the value of the university to business and industry in the region.

However, although those external stakeholders had many positive things to say about their particular relationships with the university, neither from that meeting, nor from the self-evaluation report nor detailed discussion with university staff, could the team see evidence of the university's strategic approach to its service to society or, rather, its customer relationship management. Again, there was no clear evidence of how the university targeted and systematised the contribution, whether in terms of finance or time, from its external stakeholders or indeed how the university prioritised, planned and monitored the level of its external engagement.

This is not to underestimate the value of the range of current interactions and cooperation to the university and its external stakeholders:

- the maintenance of up-to-date, industry and practitioner relevant curricula;

- the responsiveness of the university's curricula to industry-identified needs;

- mutually beneficial practice placements and work experience opportunities which were often a prelude to permanent recruitment;

- working with professional bodies to agree the mutual recognition of the academic and vocational qualifications of practitioners for admission into and advance standing on academic and professional body programmes;

- the contribution of individual external stakeholders as guest practitioner lecturers;

- the practical skills and vocational preparedness of the university's graduates as employees;

- the provision of more Continuous Professional Development (CPD)-focused Masters level programmes;

- and the overall contribution of the university's staff and students to the life and culture of the region and city in which the external stakeholders operated and its consequent attractiveness to external investors.

Nevertheless, the university seemed to the team to be a somewhat reactive partner in the relationships described. The university did not demonstrate to the team how it might take

individual relationships further and how it might systematise and operationalise at institutional level its administration of and its approach across all relationships so as to increase the level of diversity of activity and simultaneously generate additional income. The team believed that the university could fruitfully explore extending its external consultancy provision and sponsorship of its research projects; securing studentships through the negotiation of externally sponsored research projects and consultancies; similarly, negotiating externally sponsored placements or internships for its students; and developing and expanding its lifelong learning activities and professional training courses.

Many of the external stakeholders whom the team met or their family members were themselves graduates of the university and their support for the university was based not only on mutual interest but also an affection for and gratitude towards the university. The team felt that this goodwill could be harnessed in two further ways.

Firstly, the team suggests the engagement of representative external stakeholders in the university's strategic and operational planning processes. It is a matter for the university whether this be through some consultation board, or, given the time pressure and workload of many of the external stakeholders, through more direct, perhaps virtual, electronic consultation.

Secondly, the team suggests that the university follows through on work it has already initiated on gathering information on alumni and their career progression to strengthen the Alumni Association able to assist the university in a number of ways including curriculum updating, career tracking, provision of placement opportunities and fundraising.

The university also faces a challenge in terms of defending its market share in the context of a demographic downturn. Word of mouth and the perceived quality of its provision may well not suffice and the university needs to systematise and extend its cooperation with local and regional secondary schools. This matter is all the more urgent for the university in the light of its heavy dependence on one particular single feeder secondary school.

The team heard from the university staff that much had already begun in this area: university staff visits to secondary schools, university open days, taster sessions for secondary school students, use of university accommodation and facilities by secondary schools, joint cultural and other events with secondary schools. However, again, the university would benefit from articulating a strategic approach to its prioritisation, planning and monitoring of this activity.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Systematise and operationalise at institutional level its administration of the university's customer relationship management with a view to:

  - extending consultancy provision and external sponsorship of research projects

  - securing externally sponsored studentships and internships

  - developing and extending lifelong learning and professional training courses

- Engage external stakeholders in the university's strategic and operational planning.

- Strengthen and improve the relationship with former graduates through the Alumni Association.

- Systematise the university's engagement with regional secondary schools.

6. Quality culture

The university has set up a quality management system based on ISO 9001. The university must also adhere to any requirements determined by national legislation. Underpinning the quality management system is a set of documents comprising:

- the rector's statement

- the Quality Plan

- the Quality Manual

- operational procedures and instructions

- recorded data gathered as a result of the operation of the quality management system.

The quality management system is overseen by an internal Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Educational Activities which included academic staff, a student representative and a representative external stakeholder. This Commission:

- coordinates the quality management system

- reports to the executive on its operation

- develops, distributes and collates related documents

- plans internal audits

- and otherwise acts for the university in relation to the quality management system.

The university has made considerable effort to set up its quality management system and it figured prominently in its self-evaluation report. However, in meetings with staff and students, the team did not gain the impression of shared ownership or that the quality management system was deeply embedded in the university's culture. There appeared to be compliance with the quality management system but little common understanding of its purpose and benefits. To some extent, this may reflect the team's view that, although ISO 9001 norms are possibly a sound choice for the quality assurance of the university's support and administrative activities, they may be less suitable for core educational processes in teaching and learning and in research. The team questioned the appropriateness of the university's quality management system. ISO 9001 has a tendency to focus on processes rather than on people, enhancement and cultural change. For example, mention has already been made positively of the full appropriateness of the university's externally driven systems for the approval, amendment, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes but negatively of the university's failure to operationalise the improvement of the classification of study programmes. See Section 3, Teaching and Learning, above.

Similarly, mention has already been made of the monitoring of individual research activity at institutional level but of the lack of systematic prioritisation and enhancement of research at university level. See Section 4, Research, above.

The team's meetings with staff and students continuously elicited comment on the sound communication existing in small institutions. The team noted that, as a private institution, the university displayed clear awareness of its students also as customers. There is a general feeling on both sides that student issues are listened to and addressed. The students themselves were aware of the formal systems, which they might use, and broadly expressed confidence that they could readily approach study programme level and university staff. To some extent, this may have engendered a degree of complacency as the team detected a lack of success in closing some of the feedback loops on certain quality assurance processes so as to confirm how an issue had been addressed and what action had been taken.

The university demonstrated an awareness of the challenges to teaching and learning quality arising from a downturn in student recruitment and consequent smaller cohort sizes. The university saw the maintenance of entry and exit standards as not just a matter of academic integrity but also as a key determinant of its reputation and attractiveness to employers and students.

The team was advised that all staff have responsibility for the quality assurance of its study programmes as identified in the Quality Manual with regard to such processes as programme evaluation and monitoring, with the Research and Didactic Department having oversight. Both staff and students confirmed the comprehensive use of anonymous student evaluation questionnaires. Return rates for the questionnaires was reported to be high but, again, although their outputs were analysed and actioned by staff, they were reported to be not fed back in any form to students.

The team was satisfied that staff appraisal systems were in place and in operation. The university advised the team of compliance with national mandatory requirements for the evaluation of staff. These allowed staff development needs and requests to be identified. The university was less clear on how inadequate performance would be addressed if, say, reported through the anonymous student questionnaire mechanism. The university advised that such an outcome had never occurred, arguing that the university enjoyed a committed and relatively mature staffing complement whose developmental needs would be addressed immediately once they were identified.

The university acknowledged the constraint, not just arising from the financial situation of the university but also from the national criteria, in relation to academic staff on recruitment. In essence, the university recruited staff who were already qualified and there was less need for detailed induction and monitoring arrangements for new staff. Existing staff reported that the university was broadly supportive of their development, for example, in relation to staff's doctoral studies, but limited in its own offer of, say, continuous professional development

training and limited in the time and financial support made available to academic staff to turn that broad supportiveness into individual reality. Overall, the team noted the university's expectation that all academic staff should share the burden of the university current financial restriction by discharging a full teaching load in accord with their appointment status.

The team was advised that the university relied on individual information systems for its data collection rather than an integrated system within its quality management framework. As a first step, if the university acts upon the team's recommendation that it strengthen strategic and operational planning, it could map the information demands of that planning process against data currently collected to ensure that its monitoring and decision-making were appropriately and adequately informed and that strategic challenges were identified and addressed. This relatively simple mapping, whilst not necessarily optimal, would be at far lower cost than the full integration of all its information systems.

The university monitored student achievement through assessment. In the context of a single faculty structure, this meant that programme level and institutional level oversight were almost concurrent. The university also sought to evidence student achievement through the high levels of employability of its students and the high demand for its graduates amongst key employers. However, graduate tracking was incomplete and chiefly reliant on completion of a questionnaire soon after graduation and on personal or professional body contact. Again, the strengthening of the Alumni Association should improve that tracking.

Overall student satisfaction levels were high and the students whom the team met reported that opportunities to engage as student representatives or through quality assurance mechanisms, such as questionnaires, were taken up. However, the team believed student participation might be higher if the university more actively fed back on how issues raised by students had been addressed and actioned. That student satisfaction applied to all stages of their student life cycle: recruitment, accuracy and availability of information, induction, tutor support and practice placements. Students were aware of where to find information and were confident that their specific queries would be answered.

The students whom the team met had clear vocational and employment goals and valued the university's emphasis on employability, provision of placement opportunities and the practitioner-informed nature of its curricula. They had high regard for the commitment and disciplinary expertise of the university's academic staff.

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Review the appropriateness of the university's quality management system.

- Ensure the university's data collection and analysis aligns with the university's strategic and operational planning processes.

- Promote more actively the improvements and efficiencies deriving from the evaluative operation of the quality management system to the university's staff and students so as to encourage stronger internal stakeholder ownership.

- Improve the closure of feedback loops to the students so as to encourage higher student engagement in the university's quality assurance processes.

7. Internationalisation

In its self-evaluation report, the university set out its approach to internationalisation through a description of its Community Programmes Office and some general statements in relation to the university being comparable in certain areas (such as provision of public information) to other universities in the European Higher Education Area. The team was able to glean little more from its meetings with staff, and overall gained the impression that the university still had to think through and articulate a comprehensive internationalisation strategy and that the actual level of internationalisation was quite low.

It is not therefore clear to the team what the university was trying to do in this area and how it was trying to do it. The Community Programmes Office chiefly focuses on drawing down and administering project funding for staff and student exchanges and for training and learning projects such as a cited Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. The team heard individual accounts of fruitful incoming and outgoing staff and student exchanges but was not advised how these evidenced examples of a strategic, top down approach. Rather they emerged as bottom-up individual initiatives, although admittedly possibly resultant from the institutional dissemination of information about such opportunities.

Similarly, within that context, the team could not determine a strategic approach to foreign language provision. The team saw evidence of that provision through the Community Programmes Office and heard complimentary comment on its usefulness in preparing students for exchanges. However, even here, the university could do more to encourage student participation, say, by programming returning exchange students to brief and to respond to questions from students still in the early stages of their candidatures. As already mentioned, the team did not find evidence of the university addressing current diversification challenges through consideration of repositioning its foreign language provision: for example, via delivery of at least part of the curriculum in, say, English language or via improving staff English language competence to facilitate international research engagement.

With limited exceptions, there was a low level of university collaborative engagement with other universities in the European Union and internationally, even in the area of research where such engagements are expected more. The university currently offers no awards with international partners.

Again, this is not an area where the university has so far prioritised, planned and monitored its development. The university should look to an internationalisation strategy, which would include:

- creation of international partnerships

- a framework of the coordination of foreign language (probably English language) provision

- increase in staff mobility

- increase in student mobility

- orientation of curricula to international standards, most importantly the European Standards and Guidelines

- assessment of the feasibility of expanding the university's infrastructure (for example, its accommodation arrangements and Romanian language provision) to facilitate incoming exchanges.

In turn, each of the sub-activities could be operationalised with actions, locus of responsibility, resource implications, timescales and key performance indicators. For example, a framework for the coordination of foreign language provision might detail actions in relation to:

- use of discipline text books in foreign languages

- use of/recruitment of foreign visiting lecturers

- foreign language courses and study support

Recommendations

The team recommends that the university:

- Develop an internationalisation strategy, operationalised with actions, locus of responsibility, resource implications, timescales and key performance indicators.

8. Conclusion

The team acknowledges that the university had faced and is facing significant challenges: a volatile national higher education sector, an economic and demographic downturn, high levels of migration and unemployment and increased competition.

The university has remained optimistic despite these challenges and repeated annual budget deficits. On the positive side, this optimism flows from confidence in a dedicated, professional and hard-working staff and a sound reputation amongst regional employers and students. On the negative side, the optimism is based on an expectation that an upturn in recruitment will just occur without dramatic repositioning or further strategic action by the university.

In fact, the team felt that the university might be better to strengthen its strategic and operational planning as tools to enable it to seek out an active, innovative role within the larger community of small, private Romanian higher education institutions. The competition for the provision of law, business and management amongst such institutions and their state associates is intense. The university needs to look at setting itself as a distinctive and innovative leader within that larger community.

For ease of reference, the full list of recommendations to the university is set out below:

- Reconsider the organisational structure but within the national legislative framework. The Board of Directors should withdraw from the executive management of the institution and leave the management to a strong Rectorate and a responsibly acting Senate. The Board of Directors should define only the general framework and monitor the managers of the institution.

- Re-establish the Law Faculty or eliminate the faculty level altogether.

- Strengthen strategic and operational planning so as to address current challenges.

- Identify benchmarks and performance indicators for strategic and operational planning, drawn from comparable institutions.

- Further align with all aspects of the Bologna Process and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (for example, student-centred learning, involvement of stakeholders, internationalisation, employability).

- Operationalise the improvement of the classification of study programmes, for example, improvement from classification "E" to classification "D".

- Consider the greater exploitation of the university's virtual learning environment, including increased use of e-learning for campus-based programmes.

- Reconsider the attractiveness of the study offer and seek to introduce new attractive programmes (for example, interdisciplinary programmes, professional education programmes).

- Consider new study programmes where students study the first or the first two years at the university and conclude their studies in Iași or elsewhere.

- Subject to future accreditation, consider the creation of a Master's programme in Law (with a niche emphasis on Economics).

- Formalise and extend practical/professional elements in study programmes and introduce student entitlement to obligatory internships.

- Develop "Student Corners" within the university building in order to strengthen self-directed learning of students, group work, discussion and communication within student groups, and social activities.

- Define a university-wide research policy and set research priorities in the context of being a teaching and learning university.

- Systematise support for (especially young) academic staff including the creation of a supportive workload balancing model allowing for both teaching and research.

- Systematise and operationalise at institutional level its administration of the university's customer relationship management with a view to:
  - extending consultancy provision and external sponsorship of research projects
  - securing externally sponsored studentships and internships
  - developing and extending lifelong learning and professional training courses

- Engage external stakeholders in the university's strategic and operational planning.

- Strengthen and improve the relationship with former graduates through the Alumni Association.
- Systematise the university's engagement with regional secondary schools.

- Review the appropriateness of the university's quality management system.

- Ensure the university's data collection and analysis aligns with the university's strategic and operational planning processes.

- Promote more actively the improvements and efficiencies deriving from the evaluative operation of the quality management system to the university's staff and students so as to encourage stronger internal stakeholder ownership.

- Improve the closure of feedback loops to the students so as to encourage higher student engagement in the university's quality assurance processes.

- Develop an internationalisation strategy, operationalised with actions, locus of responsibility, resource implications, timescales and key performance indicators.