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

'VALAHIA' UNIVERSITY OF TÂRGOVIȘTE

EVALUATION REPORT

January 2014

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Quality and Diversity
of the Romanian Universities





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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of *the 'Valahia' University of Târgoviște (VUT)*. The evaluation took place in 2013 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 taking place 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 focuses 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.



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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 it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2. ‘Valahia’ University of Târgoviște’s profile

VUT’s operating environment is a challenging one. Like other institutions in the Romanian public sector, it experienced hardship in the recent financial crisis and continues to be subject to cuts imposed at short notice. The emergency measures decreed by government in June 2013 – between the two visits of the team – led to over 50 redundancies among administrative staff and a forced restructuring of the support systems.

VUT’s location also poses problems. At a distance of 80km from Bucharest, it is exposed to competition for student numbers, which compounds the difficulties caused by demographic decline. Moreover, although well embedded in the county of Dâmbovița and in the region of South Muntenia, VUT’s ability to commit to long-term strategic plans is compromised by the possibility of the imminent re-drawing of regional boundaries by national government.

Finally, VUT was disappointed by its classification as a teaching and learning institution with a lower funding allocation. To be formally considered a ‘teaching-oriented’ university fell well below its aspirations. VUT is confident in its belief that quality learning and teaching must be nourished by original research. It aims to be a comprehensive university, as strong in course delivery as in research, with a clear mission of service to its socio-economic community. Its profile suggests that it could be lean, agile, capable of rapid response to social change, innovative and entrepreneurial. It enjoys the academic autonomy introduced by Law 1/2011. Its plans to move to a new integrated site are well advanced, thanks to successful bids to EU and national funding bodies.

Currently, VUT has approximately 7,000 students, of whom 5% are studying at doctoral and 20% at Master levels. This number is forecast to rise to 8,000 during the current academic year. The University’s principal challenge is to gain critical mass on a fragile resource base – by raising its profile at home and abroad, by judicious management of its course portfolio, and by engagement with business and industry.



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1.3. The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a committee of ten persons: three vice-rectors, five senior academics and administrators, and two students. It was chaired by Vice-Rector Laura Gorghiu. The composition of the self-evaluation group had been determined by the rector and vice-rectors. It had met regularly and had had discussions with employers, alumni, staff and students. Various informants reported that they had been involved in its preparation – albeit more in the updating of data than in the contribution of opinion and analysis. The committee commented that its major difficulty was compressing into the IEP format information which in Romanian evaluations was much more extensive.

The report contained ample data, including the Strategic Plan 2012-16 and the Operational Plan for 2013. Overall, however, it presented as a wordy document, well informed regarding European Higher Education policy, but insufficiently focused and lacking a clear sense of direction. It strove to cover all policy and developmental options, but did not set clear priorities in the framework of a feasible growth plan.

The VUT self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in April 2013. At the same time it was published on the VUT website. The visits of the evaluation team to VUT took place in May and October 2013. In between, VUT provided the evaluation team with additional documentation.

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

- Professor Tove Bull, *former rector of University of Tromsø, Norway, team chair*
- Professor Ingegerd Palmér, *former rector of Luleå University of Technology and of Mälardalen University, both in Sweden*
- Dr Vaidotas Viliūnas, *Principal of Marijampolė's College and former Vice-Rector of Vytautas Magnus University, both in Lithuania*
- Mr Mateusz Celmer, *Wrocław University of Technology (Poland)*
- Dr Howard Davies, *independent consultant and senior adviser to EUA, team coordinator*

The team thanks Rector Călin Dinu Oros for his kind invitation, generous hospitality and readiness to share information and opinion. It thanks all those that it met for their openness to question and dialogue. Finally, it wishes to record its special gratitude to Vice-Rector Laura Gorghiu, who ensured that the quality of the documentation was very high and who coordinated the logistics of the visits with great efficiency and warmth.



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2. Governance and institutional decision making

VUT was founded in 1992. At the time of its creation, it had two Faculties and 700 students. It has since expanded its faculty structure and increased its student numbers tenfold. This growth mirrors recent history at national level. In 1989 Romania had over forty universities; it now has more than one hundred, with over one million students. Expansion was, until the recent financial crisis, accompanied by rising funding.

Latterly, however, austerity measures have constrained VUT's development and limited its strategic options. Since 2009, student numbers have fallen, due to three factors: demographic decline, financial constraints, and the diminishing ability of secondary school students to reach the standards set by the baccalaureate. Revenue also fell sharply, despite successful recourse to EU funding (ESF, ERDF), but has since rebounded. Yet, even though salary cuts have been restored and the worst period of austerity is apparently over, public funding remains annual, subject to unpredictable revision, and delivered only at short notice. VUT's planning horizon is short.

The team was of the view that such circumstances would be best addressed by decision-making processes that were speedy, well-informed and regularly endorsed by wide consensus. At first sight, however, VUT appears to enjoy a formal autonomy that allows little flexibility or scope for rapid response to external opportunities. The 220 Articles of the University Charter derive largely from legal requirements. They reveal a high degree of regulation and suggest a correlatively low degree of discretion and of internal devolution at institutional level.

Moreover, VUT's academic structure, for an institution with 7,000 students, is far from being compact. It has eight Faculties and one doctoral school. Each Faculty has constituent departments and research centres. The whole is suffused by a pyramidal committee structure with Senate at its apex, as well as by a managerial hierarchy which is capped by the Administrative Council. The latter is composed of senior administrators, the Deans and the rectoral team. By law, neither Deans nor rectoral team can be voting members of Senate, which, with 49 terms of reference clearly specified, is the supreme decision-making body of the University.

The Rector is elected by the academic community to a four-year mandate. The mandate is informed by a four-year strategic plan which, in turn, constitutes the substance of a formal contract between Rector and Senate. On the face of it, this arrangement carries a number of risks: breakdown of dialogue, protracted deliberation and negotiation, reduced capacity to respond speedily to external developments.



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The team was therefore very interested to hear the views of the VUT community on this range of issues. It heard that, while there might be over-regulation at sectoral level, this was beneficial to the extent that it functioned as a guarantee of quality.

Regarding the number of Faculties, it heard no strong reservations. In general, VUT colleagues felt that the existing academic structure (together with the projected new Faculty of Political Science and Journalism) was an appropriate platform for the development of the course portfolio. Moreover, no expenditure would be saved by Faculty mergers. The team, however, is unconvinced. It feels that there would be savings of time, if not money, as academic staff would be relieved of some of their administrative duties. At the same time, there would be more scope for inter-disciplinary curriculum development. While it is true that re-structuring for its own sake would be disruptive, the team considers that the move to the new integrated campus will present an excellent opportunity to review the situation.

In respect of the relations between the Rector (and Administrative Council) and the Senate, tensions were generally perceived to be minimal and well managed. The separation of executive and legislative was regarded as a founding principle of institutional governance and as a proper safeguard against abuse. The existence of the contract helped sustain consensus, without unduly limiting the freedom of manoeuvre of the rectoral team. This was the substance of the views expressed to the team.

The team discussed this governance model at length, making no judgement. Certainly, the competence of the rectoral team was impressive, in terms of its accurate overview of the University and its confident management of the changes under way. Equally impressive was the extent of the progress made between the team's two visits: 54 new programmes approved or in the process of accreditation; 103 new state-funded places, including at doctoral level; acquisition of laboratory equipment and a raft of research bids submitted to EU and national funding bodies. The team had no sense that VUT is a university in danger of being paralysed by over-regulation and by complex decision-making structures.

Insofar as there was any threat to broad consensus, it stemmed from the co-existence of two generations of staff, separated not only by age but also by the cultural and political changes of twenty five years ago. In the view of the team, however, this was a creative tension. It brought different perspectives, but revealed no damaging gap in the degree of commitment to the VUT mission and strategy.

The team had two reservations concerning representation. First, it noted that the Senate has no external members. External stakeholders participate on advisory committees, but are not voting members of the sovereign body. Given the commitment of the stakeholders who met the team, and in particular the enthusiasm of the alumni group, their absence from the Senate is regrettable. Secondly, the team considered that the student representatives do not



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take full advantage of their formal participation. While the students union maintains a strong focus on social and cultural events and on the quality of the physical facilities, its active membership extends to only 1% of the student body. Such a low level of representation risks reducing the credibility of its officers sitting on Senate and on its committees.

Finally, the team considered the Strategic Plan 2012-16 and the Operating Plan for 2013. It found them to be strong on matters of educational principle and on the detail of performance indicators. However, they gave little concrete sense either of the staging of institutional development over the four-year period or of the existence of contingency planning in the current climate of uncertainty. They contained no risk analysis and no alternative scenarios. This is not to suggest that VUT's rectorate, Administrative Council and Senate are unaware of opportunities and threats. On the contrary, all the team's interlocutors were acutely conscious of the challenges facing VUT. The team suggests that consensus will be stronger if possible setbacks are factored in to the planning process and fully debated.

The team therefore recommends that VUT:

- ▶ envisage alternative future scenarios, on the basis of the analysis of risk, and incorporate these into strategic planning
- ▶ prioritise more explicitly, particularly regarding research and internationalisation (as indicated in sections 4 and 7 below)
- ▶ reconsider an organisation of the academic structure appropriate to the new campus
- ▶ encourage students to maximise their contribution to institutional governance



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3. Learning and teaching

As indicated earlier, the academic community of VUT regards the link between teaching and research as indissoluble. Academic staff informed the team that they tried to devote an equal proportion of their time to each activity. The benefit to the students was very clearly expressed by the large group who met the team. They were extremely enthusiastic. Some, originating from outside the region, reported that they had enrolled at VUT because of the high reputation of the teaching staff. Some, in fact, had come from Bucharest, drawn by the staff/student ratio of just over 1:20 (300+ staff to 7000+ students).

The team wonders how VUT will sustain this ratio – given its intention to expand student numbers on a constrained resource base, while at the same time maintaining its commitment to research. Part of the answer lay in the growth of blended learning systems, based on Moodle among others, and on the potential for more integrated and versatile class timetabling offered by the move to the integrated campus. Recruiting students to chemistry and physics only in alternating years, thus reducing the number of small cohorts, is another expedient adopted by the Faculty of Science and Arts, with a view to both raising enrolments and rationalising the deployment of academic staff.

‘Small group teaching’ was mentioned frequently in the team’s encounters; ‘student-centred learning’ less so. The discourse of ‘learning outcomes’ appears not yet to be dominant in course design. Nevertheless, the team heard evidence of the students’ satisfaction with their opportunity to learn through discovery and debate. Assessment methods are varied – formative and summative, with credit points for project work and practical activities.

Small group teaching also makes for ease of communication between students and teachers, a personal interface and a readiness to resolve problems. The good staff-student ratio allows for the provision of personal tutors who are available to assist with academic problems as well as with issues such as difficulties of adaptation to degree-level study. These points were made consistently by students, staff and senior managers.

The alumni also spoke eloquently about the excellent platform for subsequent career choices which VUT had given them. Some felt that they had been able to acquire their professional skills on the basis of the theoretical knowledge gained through study. More generally, there was a feeling that the curriculum should have more practical content, both to increase motivation on course and to ease the transition to the world of work. Many expressed their willingness to participate in course design, in their dual capacity of former students and potential employers.



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The team considers that this is an offer that VUT should take up – within the bounds permitted by the national accreditation agency. It will help VUT consolidate its alignment with the discourse of learning outcomes on which European qualifications frameworks are built and which European quality assurance is likely to emphasise in the future.

The team also considers that VUT should not ignore the fact that students may opt for self-employment particularly when, on the integrated campus, there is more scope for the mix of inter-disciplinary studies that is characteristic of, for example, the creative industries.

The success of the small group learning and teaching is underwritten by a number of factors. Students declare that they are satisfied, not only with their courses, but with the quality assurance procedures. External examiners moderate the assessment processes. Teacher evaluation takes place on an annual cycle in three modes: appraisal by head of department; assessment by peers; evaluation by student questionnaire. Academic staff reported that 80% of students submitted anonymous paper-based responses; suggestions and complaints were taken up and acted upon. Staff development short courses are provided by the Teacher Training Department for the updating of learning and teaching methodology and for the enhancement of pedagogic skills.

While the team was unable to observe classes or to follow the detail of curriculum development activities, it gained a strong impression of competence and confidence in the management and delivery of learning and teaching. The positive comments made by staff, students and alumni suggested that, despite the tight regulatory framework, there was considerable scope for creative course design. The team's recommendations are intended to help consolidate the ethos of academic achievement of which it became very conscious during its visits to VUT.

The team recommends that VUT

- ▶ consider how to maintain small group teaching in a context of declining resources
- ▶ consider how to introduce more practical skills into curricula, as well as more internships
- ▶ consider how to involve alumni and employers in course design
- ▶ consider how to prepare students for self-employment



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4. Research

The priority set on research has already been mentioned. This came through clearly in the team's discussions with staff. About 250 of the 300 staff have doctorates and are research active; this percentage is likely to remain stable, given that non-PhD-holders can only be recruited at assistant level and have five years in which to gain their doctorate. Teachers who opt out of research activity are obliged to work an extra four teaching hours per week. While academic staff manage to divide their time equally between research and teaching, they also expend considerable effort seeking research funding and preparing bids. Promotion depends on research, rather than on proven prowess as a teacher.

The balance – and synergy – of teaching and research therefore depends, in addition to the factors cited in section 3 above, on the continuing availability of research funding, on the stability of the staff-student ratio, and on the extent to which the design of new courses is informed by recent and original research outputs. This last factor is of critical importance to the mission of VUT. The team believes that there is scope for better aligning proposals for curriculum development with the approval of research applications.

The team visited the new suite of laboratories which currently are the main feature of the integrated campus to which VUT will in due course move. It was reassured to learn that the procurement and installation of technical equipment has begun. It was reassured, too, to learn that efforts will be made to ensure that Bachelor students – the last group scheduled to move – will not suffer from the removal of laboratories and postgraduate provision from their locations in the city.

A fully equipped new campus, a continuing high level of research activity, expansion of the course portfolio with a continuing synergy with research – these are all ambitious targets taken singly, not to mention in conjunction one with another. Currently, 34% of the total budget has to be sourced from external research funds and earned income. Competition, as was pointed out to the team, is particularly tough for a comprehensive university bidding against a number of mono-disciplinary research institutes. The team considers that it is precisely in the context of these interacting developments that the strategic planning function should explicitly consider contingency and fall-back positions, as has been stressed in section 2 above.

It is clear that the relocation of the research facilities must have the highest priority; it is on this that the growth of VUT is predicated. At the same time, the team considers that, in order to carry forward its mission, the University should find ways of incentivising research productivity – beyond the opportunity for promotion. Although research is a priority at VUT,



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the team noted few measures in the plans to increase the production of research. It will also be important to halt the fall in the number of academics attending conference abroad. A thriving research culture depends on the circulation of persons with ideas and on their interaction with foreign researchers with whom collaborative links can be built, whether these links be in terms of EU-funded research projects or of joint curriculum development at Master and doctoral levels.

Finally, the team notes that while the funding obtained from EU structural funds and framework programmes is well balanced in terms of its disciplinary range, the funding which comes from national agencies has a stronger focus on the 'hard' sciences. This is wholly understandable in terms of VUT's headline research commitment to renewable energy and to the current phase of investment in equipment-intensive facilities. At the same time, the team observes that the three engineering Faculties recruited 31% of the total full-time Bachelor students in 2012-13, but a reduced percentage of Master students (24%) and only 16% of doctoral students. This suggests that, in line with VUT's aspirations to grow as a comprehensive university, it should give some thought to an overarching strategy covering the 'soft' sciences.

VUT research policy is decided and monitored at the highest level. It features as a discrete strand of the strategic plan. It is led from within the rectorate and submitted to regular monitoring and quality control at departmental and Faculty levels. The Senate approves the setting up of new research centres. The team has full confidence in the ability of the rectorate to be comprehensively briefed on the detail of Horizon 2020 and the new generation of structural funds. It has no reason to doubt that the necessary changes to research management and infrastructure will follow and that they will be incorporated into the Operational Plans for the years 2014 onwards.

The team therefore recommends that VUT

- ▶ when designing new curricula, consider ways of reinforcing the link between research and teaching, in line with its policy
- ▶ place the highest priority on bringing the new campus, with the research centre, into full operation
- ▶ establish incentives for the production of research
- ▶ seek to reverse the decline in the numbers of staff attending conferences abroad
- ▶ develop a strategy for promoting research in the 'soft' sciences



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5. Service to society

The city of Târgoviște has grown smaller in the past twenty years, losing about one quarter of its population, which now stands at about 75,000. Previously flourishing steel and oil industries have gone into decline. Unemployment is relatively high, as is the level of migration abroad (notably to Spain) and of the return to rural occupations. In order to address the latter factor, VUT runs a satellite campus in Alexandria, with a strong focus on agriculture. The University's regional catchment area is nevertheless not large. As indicated above, Bucharest is not far away and neither is Brașov. Pitești and Ploești, which also have universities, are even closer. Strictly speaking, VUT's immediate reach extends to the boundaries of Dâmbovița county. VUT is insistent that employability is an important component of its definition of quality. This is not only because ARACIS (the national quality assurance agency) requires evidence of at least 30% employment rates in the year after graduation, but also because of the University's role in satisfying skilled labour needs.

The team met staff from the Department of Distance and Lifelong Learning, which sits outside the Faculty structure and reports directly to the rectorate. Distance learning provision focuses on economics and law, mirroring the course content delivered in-house. The department is leading the way in the development of the blended learning referred to earlier and offers staff development on course and materials design. Now ten years old, it monitors labour market needs at county and regional levels and tailors its provision accordingly. It liaises with the schools inspectorate regarding in-service training and conversion courses for intending teachers. VUT's relations with local schools are good – necessarily so, since 80% of the students come from the region – and students told the team of their involvement in open days and visits to schools.

The team learnt that 70,000 people in the region are dependent in one way or another on VUT. It met a range of external stakeholders: collaborating researchers, representatives of the school and VET sectors, manufacturing industry, the church, the city and county councils, and the environmental protection agency. All spoke very positively of VUT's contribution. The University deals with the municipal, county, regional and national structures in place. Relations with all levels of the administration are said by the rectorate to be good and to have improved steadily over a 20-year period.

However, no funding comes to VUT from city, county or regional authorities. Instead, core funding comes from the ministry, on the basis of a full-time-equivalent student allocation, per capita and by discipline, together with monies for agreed ear-marked capital expenditure. Service to the local and regional community is therefore funded irregularly, reliant on national sources and on EU instruments (such as the European Social Fund) which may



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themselves be steered from Bucharest. Lifelong learning provision can be covered in this way, but distance learning is delivered on a fee-paying basis.

The regional dimension is nevertheless strategically important. VUT regards the South Muntenia region as a potentially dynamic environment – with the Renault factory the pole of attraction – in which it can ultimately thrive. The team is confident that VUT’s appreciation of regional development policy, as well as its contacts with the European Commission, mean that it is well placed to extend its collaboration with industry once its research facilities are implanted on the new campus. Knowledge transfer with direct outcomes in job creation is, the team believes, a realistic prospect. To this end, the team advises VUT to be more proactive in its relations with the municipal authorities; it heard that they were good, but that they could be more productive.

In the view of the team, VUT’s recruitment policies and lifelong learning service are limited by the unavailability of the accreditation of prior experiential learning. Even the recognition of prior formal learning is allowable only for pre-Bologna students. Beyond the provision for primary and secondary teachers, the team gained little sense of the extent to which particular social groups were actively targeted. It learnt that, consistent with the government’s commitment to the European Union, a small number of free places were reserved for Roma students, but that these were frequently not taken up.

One instance of active targeting is the strong focus on disabled students. However, the team noted that physical access is not always possible. It suggests that the planners of the integrated campus address this problem and make the necessary modifications before the new buildings are commissioned.

Finally, the team considered that the creation of a university of the third age would, as has happened in other universities, bind VUT more closely to the local community, extend the scope of its cultural activity, and help it project itself as an academic resource open to all.

The team therefore recommends that VUT

- ▶ raise its level of collaboration with the city and particularly the county
- ▶ intensify its efforts to modify the physical environment for disabled students
- ▶ explore the possibility of organising a university of the third age



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6. Quality culture

The team was informed that, between its two visits, VUT had either submitted for accreditation, or received approval for, 40 new programmes. This represents considerable investment of staff time, as well as of financial resources, since ARACIS is obliged to levy a charge on its services.

The team was in no doubt regarding the thoroughness of VUT's quality assurance procedures. The Self-Evaluation report, the University Charter and the Organisational and Functioning Regulations all spelt out in considerable detail the measures taken, at different levels of the academic and administrative structure, to meet ARACIS requirements.

Notwithstanding its comments on governance in section 2 above, the team nevertheless wonders whether the intensity of regulation and procedures puts in place, rather than a quality culture, a culture of compliance. The need to ensure that the quality management system conforms with ISO 9001 norms, the external accreditation of research centres, and the stipulations of the ministry regarding course titles – suggest that there may be a risk of bureaucratisation.

The team understands absolutely the strategic and financial importance of satisfying all the requirements imposed from the outside. In no way does it suggest that VUT falls short in meeting them. However, in the interests of enhancing not only the quality of provision but also the quality of the internal assurance procedures, it suggests two steps that VUT might wish to consider.

First, it will be worth identifying incidences of over-observance and duplication, thus freeing up staff time for the deepening of quality culture within the institution. This would permit a shift of emphasis from process to practice, with active debate of the quality aspects of some of the issues raised in this evaluation report. For example, the greater involvement of students, alumni and external stakeholders in the course design process; the monitoring of the outcomes of blended learning for different categories of students; the linkage of research to the Bachelor course portfolio.

Secondly, the team suggests that VUT monitor developments at European level in order to anticipate the evolution of national quality requirements. There is ample scope for such a posture – in the impending revision of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), the revision of the ECTS Users' Guide, the preparation of the European Area of Recognition Manual, and the discussions of a greater degree of automatic recognition of academic qualifications. The revision of the ESG is perhaps particularly important, since it is likely to turn the internal quality assurance spotlight on the place of learning outcomes in course



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design and student assessment. As mentioned earlier, this is one area in which the team felt there to be an absence of debate. Not only will greater alignment with European developments help to deepen the quality culture in VUT, it will also serve to raise its academic profile abroad by allowing it to keep one step ahead of its Romanian competitors.

The team recommends that VUT

- ▶ consider simplifying its quality assurance procedures as much as the current legal framework permits
- ▶ look beyond national frontiers to the debates on quality culture taking place in the EHEA



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7. Internationalisation

VUT already has numerous international links – in ERASMUS, as well as in the seventh Framework Research Programme. The team well understands, however, that collaborative contact is not sufficient in itself to achieve the gain in critical mass that VUT seeks. International student recruitment is one way to increase enrolments. The team were told of possible target markets in China, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, as well as in Greece, but it saw no detailed recruitment strategy or investment policy.

When asked on what criteria Romanian students selected institutions and courses, one Dean of Faculty listed them in order of importance: specialism, perceived institutional prestige, availability of funded places, location, and accommodation. Clearly, these factors would not necessarily be the same for foreign students, suggesting the need for a dedicated marketing drive.

For courses delivered in Romanian, the scope for expansion would appear to be limited; VUT already has the capacity to address the needs, by distance learning, of Dâmbovița's expatriate communities in Belgium, Italy and Spain.

The availability of courses delivered in English is therefore a major consideration – and one Master programme has just been approved. Such developments, however, put a strain on staffing, since international students require, at least to some extent, international teachers. The team understands that VUT has only one foreign academic in its staff of 300+. The University is advised, not merely to prioritise, but to carefully consider the detail of what makes a viable internationalisation policy. The preparatory year, already in place, is an asset, but is only a first step in integrating foreign students. As in the cases of research conferences and quality assurance discussed above, there is great value in joining the wider European and global debates.

VUT, and the rectorate in particular, has a high level of expertise in EU-funded programmes. As the new generation of structural funds, together with ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020, comes on stream, there is a real opportunity to take a holistic view of the European dimension, to identify synergies appropriate to the VUT mission and to tailor the administrative support accordingly. Transnational joint Master degrees may prove to be constructive ventures, linking research to teaching, while bringing in non-Romanian students and staff.

The advent of the new EU programmes also provides an opportunity, in the view of the team, to identify international partner institutions with common missions, objectives and operating environments. Demographic decline, globalisation and financial crisis mean that there are many other European universities in de-industrialised regions, seeking to kick-start regional



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regeneration with new modes of knowledge transfer in creative and green sectors of the economy. These universities may feel isolated; they tend not to form high profile consortia, but they may prove to be worthwhile collaborators.

The team therefore recommends that VUT

- ▶ give high priority to internationalisation
- ▶ consider offering more programmes delivered in English, together with more provision of English language classes for students and staff, while maintaining contact with the francophone world
- ▶ intensify the marketing drive to recruit more international students, in conjunction with the preparatory year
- ▶ exploit the synergies between the new EU programmes – ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020
- ▶ look for international partner institutions in similarly de-industrialised regions



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8. Conclusion

Prevailing wisdom considers that a successful region must have a university and an airport. In this sense, the proximity of Bucharest, a national hub with an international airport, can work to the advantage of VUT. Târgoviște and its vicinity have an evident potential for tourism. The Renault-owned car production plant at Mioveni is only 30km distant. These factors help explain why, despite the ongoing consequences of the financial crisis, the team sensed a buoyancy in the mood of VUT. Its planned developments are ambitious, its students and staff impressive and enthusiastic, and its senior management team well informed and proactive.

The team endorses the view that regional development is the key to future institutional growth. The recently agreed allocation of EU cohesion funds to Romania (EUR 21,75KMil for the period 2014-2020) is the fourth largest in the EU; renewable energy, which VUT has made one of its priorities, is a headline policy strand. Moreover, the prospect of a regional pole for the automotive industry appears to be viable. Of course, the regeneration of South Muntenia depends to a large extent on the resumption of economic growth across the whole of the EU, but the region can nevertheless make an important contribution – and VUT likewise. VUT's contribution is likely to consist in knowledge transfer and in the preparation of informed and skilled citizens. Its insistence on the symbiosis of teaching and research is therefore far-sighted and, in the view of the team, should be energetically sustained.

Many of the factors shaping VUT's future are imponderables and this evaluation report has stressed the degree of unpredictability in its operating environment. The move to the new integrated campus marks a major transition and an opportunity both to consolidate and to innovate. The need for efficient management of change based on consensus will test VUT's governance structures and its capacity to act quickly and decisively.

The team has expressed its reservation concerning the flexibility and transparency of the strategic planning activity. As indicated above, the process would benefit from more explicit attention to alternative scenarios and to contingency planning.

That said, the team wishes to record its full confidence in the depth of academic and managerial resource to be found in the University. In the course of this evaluation, VUT has consistently presented itself as an institution with a clear educational philosophy and as one which welcomes challenges. The team wishes it well and looks forward to hearing of its progress in due course.



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9. Summary of recommendations

The team recommends that VUT:

- ▶ envisage alternative future scenarios, on the basis of the analysis of risk, and incorporate these into strategic planning
- ▶ prioritise more explicitly, particularly regarding research and internationalisation
- ▶ reconsider an organisation of the academic structure appropriate to the new campus
- ▶ encourage students to maximise their contribution to institutional governance
- ▶ consider how to maintain small group teaching in a context of declining resources
- ▶ consider how to introduce more practical skills into curricula, as well as more internships
- ▶ consider how to involve alumni and employers in course design
- ▶ consider how to prepare students for self-employment
- ▶ when designing new curricula, consider ways of reinforcing the link between research and teaching, in line with its policy
- ▶ place the highest priority on bringing the new campus, with the research centre, into full operation
- ▶ establish incentives for the production of research
- ▶ seek to reverse the decline in the numbers of staff attending conferences abroad
- ▶ develop a strategy for promoting research in the 'soft' sciences
- ▶ raise its level of collaboration with the city and particularly the county
- ▶ intensify its efforts to modify the physical environment for disabled students
- ▶ explore the possibility of organising a university of the third age
- ▶ consider simplifying its quality assurance procedures as much as the current legal framework permits
- ▶ look beyond national frontiers to the debates on quality culture taking place in the EHEA



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- ▶ give high priority to internationalisation
- ▶ consider offering more programmes delivered in English, together with more provision of English language classes for students and staff, while maintaining contact with the francophone world
- ▶ intensify the marketing drive to recruit more international students, in conjunction with the preparatory year
- ▶ exploit the synergies between the new EU programmes – ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020
- ▶ look for international partner institutions in similarly de-industrialised regions