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## Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

### Bioterra University

#### EVALUATION REPORT

*July 2014*

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Calitate și diversitate  
a universităților din România





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## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Bioterra University. The evaluation took place in 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 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.

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?



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

## 1.2. Bioterra University's profile

Bioterra University of Bucharest (BUB) is a relatively young higher education institution, established in 1994, initially being part of Bioterra University Foundation Bucharest. The foundation was founded in the field of life science teaching and applied bioengineering, economics engineering, rural tourism, food industry, phytosanitary and zoo-veterinary food control, law and legislation. The Civil Sentence No. 88/ 19 May 1994 legalised the statute and the structure of Bioterra University Foundation.

With the implementation of the licensing and accreditation system specialisations in higher education, the specialisations operating in the framework of BUB were authorised to operate temporarily through Government Decision No. 294/1997. The specialisations of BUB were subsequently confirmed by Government Decision No. 535 /1 July 1999.

In 2002, Bioterra University went through the entire accreditation stages and was accredited by Law 480/2002. According to paragraph 1 of this law, the Bioterra University of Bucharest is a "Higher education institution, legal person of private law and public utility, part of the national education system", headquartered in Bucharest. BUB is the only accredited private university from Romania that offers specialisations in the agro-food field.

The Government Decision 2012 stipulates the following accredited specialisations:

- *Faculty of de Agro-tourism Management* accredited in 2002, specialisation in engineering and management in public food and agra-tourism (IMAPA), degree in engineering and management, duration of studies four years full time and part time and 240 credits, and re-accredited in 2011.
- *Faculty of Food Engineering (IPA)* accredited in 2005, specialisation in food engineering, degree in food engineering, duration of studies four years, full time, respectively 240 credits and re-accredited in 2011, duration of studies four years at full time education, respectively 240 credits;
- *Faculty of Control and Expertise of Food Products (CEPA)* accredited in 2005, specialisation in control and expertise of food products, degree in engineering of food product, study period of four years, full time and part time, respectively 240 credits and re-accredited in 2011;
- *Faculty of Law* accredited in 2005, specialisation in law, degree in law, duration of studies four years full time and part time, respectively 240 credits and re-accredited in 2011.

BUB also accommodates the following authorised and accredited faculties and specialisations, located in several areas over Romania:



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- Faculty of Agro-tourism Management of Focsani, Vance County, specialisation in engineering and management in public food and agro-tourism accredited;
- Faculty of Agra-tourism Management of Alexandria, Teleorman County, specialisation in engineering and management in public food and agro-tourism – provisionally (re)authorised;
- Faculty of Agro-tourism Management of Slobozia, Ialomița County, specialisation in engineering and management in public food and agro-tourism – provisionally authorised;
- Faculty of Agro-tourism Management of Buzau, Buzău County, specialisation in engineering and management in public food and agro-tourism – provisionally authorised;
- Faculty of Control and Expertise of Food Products of Alexandria, Telegram County, specialisation in control and expertise of food products - accredited;
- Faculty of Control and Expertise of Food Products of Slobozia, Ialomita County, specialisation in control and expertise of food products - accredited;
- Faculty of Control and Expertise of Food Products of Buzau, Buzau County, specialisation in control and expertise of food products – provisionally authorised;
- Faculty of Control and Expertise of Food Products of Bucharest, specialisation in environment and consumer protection – provisionally authorised.

BUB has been the initiator of two unique specialisations “Engineering and Management in Public Food and Agri- tourism” (IMAPA) and “Control and Expertise of Food Products” (CEPA).

There are 2 820 students (7 938 in 2011/2012) and 134 teachers. BUB owns its premises for education and research, including student dorms and apartments, cafeteria and social life areas. Income is primarily from tuition fees.

### 1.3. The self-evaluation process

With a view to successfully accomplishing the self-evaluation process, BUB established a self-evaluation group with 10 members. The group included two members of the committee for assessment and quality assurance, a representative of the students, the manager of the low attendance department (ELA), the administrative general manager, deans of the faculties, and the pro-rector of didactic activity.

The evaluation team notes the quality and consistency of the SER. The SER provides extensive information, supplemented by a vast range of annexes. The report could have been less descriptive and more strategic. Rather, it depicts the situation with little analytical data. The report tends to correlate the weaknesses identified by the university with regulations and policies that the university has to undergo. The report rarely explores the possible solutions to the problems in order to progress further. While the evaluation team understands the novelty of the self-evaluation exercise for BUB, it felt that the university underestimates the necessity for it concentrate on self-improvement, rather than blaming problems solely on external factors. There are major concerns that are not fully addressed (e.g. student drop-out). New steps will be needed to develop self-reflection.



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The evaluation team recognises that the university community knows about the SER, which reflects the will of the leaders to share information.

#### **1.4 The evaluation team (hereafter referred to as the team)**

The self-evaluation report, together with the annexes, was sent to the team in December 2013. The visits of the team to the university took place in January and April 2014, respectively.

The team consisted of:

- Prof. Carles Solà, former rector, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, Chair
- Prof. Ingegerd Palmér, former rector, Mälardalen University, Sweden
- Prof. Edward Jezierski, former vice-rector, Technical University of Lodz, Poland
- Jacob Müller, student, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany
- Fabrice Hénard, higher education consultant, Learning Avenue Consultancy, team Coordinator

The team thanks the Rector of Bioterra University, the Founding Rector, the President of the Senate and Catalin Galan, the liaison person as well as all the teachers, the staff and the students.

## 2. Governance and institutional decision-making

### 2.1 Mission and strategy

#### **Unclear mission statement, although the university mission does exist**

The SER stipulates that the

Didactic and research mission of the university is to train specialists with complex profile which can make an effective and ecologic use of natural environment, material, financial and human resources according to the specific tradition of the Romanian people, with the integration of foodservice, travel and legal values into an unitary conception of all elements that concur to the achievement of some performances that have to be sustainable in the European Community as well as domestically and internationally.

The team highlights the missions of the university, which trains specialists with specific profiles in scientific and economic domains related to agriculture. Students know why they have enrolled at Bioterra University — for practical training and market-focused education. The university plays a role in regional development by building up food-processing mechanisms, inventing new products to be commercialised, supporting the expansion of agro-tourism and thereby contributing to regional wealth. Another aspect of the mission of the university relates to the applied research connected to the highly practical training, and serving the local community of entrepreneurs.

While the missions are clear for the team, the university-wide mission statement remains unclear and conveys blurred messages. In the framework of the competitive higher education area in Romania and across Europe, BUB should reformulate its mission statement in a way to grasp its specialities. This would help the external communication of the university towards potential students and towards stakeholders and partners (e.g. other universities).

Nevertheless, each faculty is able to describe itself in terms of missions and overarching goals to be achieved, and comply with the overall mission of Bioterra University — despite its unclearness. The team highlights this asset that enables the university to speak with a unique voice and present a consistent education model.

#### **The strategy should be enforced**

Bioterra University adopted a new strategic plan 2012-2016. The team values such effort to channel the development of the university and setting distinct goals in quality, management, education and research. The “Strategic program of University Bioterra of Bucharest is to become a national institution recognized at European level, a professional partner in the educational and research activities in the activity areas that promotes in the educational offer”.

*The team however calls for a streamlining of the objectives identified in the plan. The strategic plan is too long and such wide a range of objectives does not help the deans and the community to understand where the university aims to go in the future.*

Besides, the strategic plan overlooks crucial information, such as:

- *The allocation of resources.* At no point does the strategic plan refer to a specific allocation of resources, the priorities to be financially supported and the breakdown policy of funding amongst faculties and locations.
- *The operational plan.* BUB should accommodate the means to make sure the strategic plan will be implemented in practice, including a calendar..

As a result, the team questions the likelihood of the strategic plan to be implemented and *advises the university to review its many objectives with the perspective of usefulness for the university future and visibility.*

In the same vein, the team listed a number of monitoring tools as featured in the SER (follow-up measures, performance indicators, assignment of responsibilities, etc.). The reality is different as few are effectively enforced.

## **2.2 University structures and decision-making**

### **Strict compliance with the law**

Bioterra University abides by the law when it comes to the management structure. All required structures are in place: Senate, Board of Administration, rector, pro-rectors, and student representatives. Management staff is composed of tenured teachers.

The team however highlights the complex interplay between BUB and the foundation. Despite attempts of university leaders to make it explicit, the team still seeks for a clearer relationship between the two entities, especially regarding the financial relationships between both structures. From a point of view of sustainability, it is vital for the university to know how to generate income instead of relying extensively on the wealth provided by the foundation. In the future, *the university should become autonomous or at least should clarify its links with the foundation.*

The team underlines the efforts by BUB regarding ethics. The institution designed an Academic Ethics and Integrity Code. In the last two years, the Ethics Committee of the Senate resolved some cases of professional misconduct. *The team urges the university leaders to give independence to this committee.*

### **Intertwined university governance structures**

The rector and the president of the Senate are subordinated to the founding rector. The ways in which BUB functions gives the impression that decisions are tied up to the founding



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rectors' influence and charisma. The team question if there is any real room for manoeuvre for the incumbent rector.

### **The university's patrimony**

The team notes the impressive patrimony of the university, which owns its premises, equipment and does not seem to be under financial constraints. The team wonders how such patrimony is managed. Once again, the relationships between the university and the foundation should be elucidated. *The team calls for an external audit of the role of the foundation vis-à-vis the university.*



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### 3. Teaching and Learning

#### A dynamic training offering, but a dramatic decrease of student intake

Since the outset, BUB has developed programmes that fit the job market demand. Programmes are regularly adapted to new requests from employers and some new have emerged in specific niches that only Bioterra University fulfils. For instance, the university has been the initiator of two unique specialisations at national level in “Engineering and Management in Public Food and Agra-tourism” and “Food Product Control and Expertise”.

The major concern relates to a continuous decrease in student intake. The reasons for such decreases are various: economic situation of some students who cannot afford to pay fees (from €450 to €800 per year), the damaged reputation of the university due to recent scandal, the little visibility of the university and the competition on the national higher education arena (four faculties now offer agro-food programmes in Romania). The university leaders are concerned and have taken several policies to limit the decrease that in return affects the income of the university (communication, modulation of fees). The situation however remains critical for the near future.

#### Students are satisfied

The team met a range of students during both visits and the overall impression confirms a high level of satisfaction with:

- The premises and the equipment, including IT,
- The smooth interaction with the teachers who are open and available,
- The possibility to study part-time for workers,
- The social life at Bioterra University,
- The mandatory training, which facilitates the relationships with employers and knowledge of the job-market. Most students value the training as a distinctive feature of Bioterra University.

Interviews with students showed some discrepancies between faculties and departments. Some put clear emphasis on job creation and project-based learning aimed at exposing students to real life situations. However, not all students get an internship. In addition, Bioterra University offers internal internships (e.g. in agro-tourism where students are trained on Bioterra-owned resorts, the so-called practice centres), which might not expose the students to the real life.

The team warns the university about the risk of obsolescence of some equipment, especially in laboratories. It is vital for Bioterra University to *monitor scientific equipment and renew it when needed. An investment plan should be designed and implemented along with the operational plan underlined above.*



## Teachers are committed to quality

The team met a dynamic community of teachers who devote a lot of time and effort in guiding their students and leading them to success.

Teachers are keen to keep their courses updated as well as developing their knowledge either in science or in economy and management. Thanks to support from the university, most manage to attend international and national conferences. Many have close links with local companies (e.g. in agro-tourism or biology) and public services (e.g. the police) that enable them to keep up-to-date with changes in regulations and practices. Others are committed to research activities, which provides them with new scientific knowledge via projects, literature and conferences.

The university leadership is keen to offer opportunities for professional development, although there is no specific policy dedicated to developing faculty members' knowledge. The team thinks professional development would serve the teaching community with a view to helping them achieve the objectives of the strategic plan – once the latter is being streamlined.

## 4. Research

### Applied research is being developed

The mission statement stipulates a strong engagement of BUB to research:

“The Scientific research mission consists in organizing and development of fundamental and applied research activities, getting the actual results in scientific advice, specialist expertise, papers, as well as in the framework of domestic and international reunions, congresses, symposia, workshops etc.”

The focus of research at Bioterra University is mainly on traditional agricultural, biotechnology, biodiversity and rural development”.

Faculties have their own research plans. These plans are included in the strategic plans for each faculty. The Faculty of Law from 2012 operates a Centre for Judicial Excellence. In the period 2010-2011, the university set up a nationally-accredited research laboratory for physics and chemistry tests with national certification. The laboratory has been equipped with modern and efficient equipment required by current standards for food composition analysis. According to the SER, the lab underwent a successful accreditation process by RENAR (national accreditation body) in 2012. A range of innovations are directly the result of research conducted at BUB and laboratories contributed to the production of products, including certain types of natural juice, alcoholic beverages, soybean granule for human consumption. The SER provides an impressive list of medals and diplomas received by the teachers of BUB for their activity awarded at international contests.

Bioterra University organises national and international events (scientific conference) on agro-food, tourism, environmental protection, and teachers also participate in international and national conferences. The team considers that the university is fully aware of the ongoing debates in the field of activities that characterises the university. Some teachers have teamed up with national and international teams and received national and European grants (e.g. European project aimed at fostering ecotourism “Comorova, the forest of seaside”).

No doctoral studies are proposed at Bioterra University and the team doubts that that it is possible to start exploring this. The university should rather allow pathways to master students to enrol other universities for their doctoral studies.

### A lack of international visibility

The team considers that there is a strong dissonance between the aspirations of Bioterra University regarding research and the reality. It fails in identifying research priorities and in highlighting its strengths. The SER lacks analytical information and the chapter on research remains so vague that it could fit any university. There is a strong need to review the strategic plan pertaining to research priorities. This is possible as long as the university leaders explore



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the type of research that fit with the university specialties and capabilities (i.e. applied research).

*The team thinks that Bioterra University should put more emphasis on applied research and leave out attempts to develop basic research. The profile of the teachers, the needs of the students and the demand from local companies clearly call for more applied research. Such research would enable more project-based teaching that is highly valued by the students and the employers.*

The scientific reputation of Bioterra University is weak compared to the research-intensive universities of Romania or Europe. So far, Bioterra University is not referenced on international databases like Web of Science. Most articles are published in the university journal (rated C) or national journals for some or more generally in conference proceedings. *The team advises Bioterra University to seek ways to encourage its researchers to prioritise publishing in internationally referenced journals, while recognising that not all staff members have the same drive and determination to become recognised scientists at global level.*



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## 5. Service to society

The team considers that applied research and projects with companies constitute the main element of Bioterra University's engagement to society. The university contributes to the regional development (all over the country thanks to multiple resorts) and to SMEs in agro-business, agro-tourism or food processing.

Internships in public services like with the police, offer opportunities to link the university with society outside the academic community.

The team highlights the many opportunities for Bioterra University to foster services to society, namely in:

- Life-long learning: *Bioterra University could leverage quality of human capital for staff companies who cannot afford to take courses at a classic university.* Bioterra University is flexible enough to offer customised courses and could also be profitable and generate external income. Today, a high number of students (especially mature students) value the possibility to study part time so they can work in parallel.
- Continue to support the teachers' responsiveness to the labour market and society, by further matching the programmes with the eco-social requirements of the region and the country. Spin-offs and small business could be supported or developed upon the initiative of Bioterra University. Sectors like agro-tourism or green energy are niche markets that the university could explore. *The team considers that Bioterra University could foster entrepreneurship and take advantage of its proficient staff, its private status and its multiple locations to initiate small businesses along with education and research.* The third mission of Bioterra University is likely to take off.

## 6. Quality culture

### Quality assurance structures in place, European quality culture in development

Bioterra University has adopted mandatory structures and they seem to function well. It set up a “Commission for assessment and quality assurance” and has developed regulation on the assessment and quality assurance of education and quality assurance system documentation, and application procedures that were approved by the Senate.

The SER reads:

The Commission monitors the implementation of procedures and quality assessment activities, inclusively by carrying out the internal audit, periodically of all aspects that contribute to the quality assurance of educational offer in accordance with the Charter of the internal audit, Code of Ethics for internal auditors, Procedure for internal audit and the internal audit sheet prepared according to guide the Quality Assessment study programs and of the Higher Education Institutions, developed by ARACIS. Commission assessment and quality assurance drafted an action plan on the quality assurance in education. Internal evaluation report has been prepared by the Commission and made public by posting and publishing.

The team values the strong commitment of the university leaders to quality assurance, which is taken seriously. However, Bioterra University leaders have little knowledge of the European Higher Education Area. *It is crucial for Bioterra University to fully endorse the “Bologna spirit” and its associated tools to become a recognised institution in Europe, especially on quality assurance, transparency of operation and internationalisation. Bioterra University should work to promote a quality culture across the university according to the European Standards and Guidelines.*

### A strong quality assurance in teaching

Bioterra University adopted a regulation of initiation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes of study. Each curriculum is audited annually by the departments, the Teaching Commission and the Assessment Commission. The assessment report is communicated to the academic community.

BUB also adopted regulation on student assessment that specifies the methodology for examination and students’ grading. It ensures that there is consistent examination and grading across the whole university.

Bioterra University claims it has organised a mandatory peer review of teachers. The peer review committee is coordinated by the annual performance evaluation commission of teaching and research at the faculty level. The commission shall work under the rules of



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evaluation of teachers by colleagues, students and university management. The department manager evaluates teachers annually by using the teacher self-assessment forms (filled by each teacher) and the peer evaluation form. Both forms enable a multifaceted evaluation of the teaching staff through which their performance are sorted by skills and accomplishments in teaching, research and service to the institution and academic community.

The team is not convinced that the peer review is implemented systematically and *calls for a wider dissemination of such an interesting tool for quality improvement.*

Bioterra University published an annual report on the teaching quality and research staff at institutional and programme levels. The report is based on evaluations by students, the results of peer evaluations (when performed) and self-assessment of teachers.

The team values the evaluation system involving the students. Students participate in evaluation of teachers by completing an evaluation form after each semester. The results of these evaluations are confidential, made available to the dean, rector and the assessed teacher. Evaluation by students is compulsory from the academic year 2007/2008, and its results are analysed at the faculty and university level.

It is worth noting that most problems are solved on the spot between teachers and students. The familial atmosphere of the university is a key asset that allows smooth interactions and informal problem-solving discussions.

In order to continue to collect information from students after graduation, the team recommends that Bioterra University develop alumni associations, design destination surveys and collect data from graduates on labour market demand.

### **Some major areas of operation are less concerned by quality assurance**

Bioterra University is more committed to the quality assurance arrangements of teaching and learning than with the financial and human resources affairs as well as organisational/administrative processes. *The team strongly advises to set up proper mechanisms allowing a robust tracking of the functioning and management of the university.* Understanding how incomes match with expenditure remained a challenge for the team, and it should not.

Research activity is not quality ensured at Bioterra University. There are no serious tools to monitor the activities and take stock of their implementation and evolution over time. Once the research strategy is in place, the team advises the university to opt for the appropriate quality assurance arrangements to ensure the enforcement of the strategy. *The calculation and tracking of hours devoted to teaching and research should be clarified.*



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## 7. Internationalisation

The team considers that there is no tangible strategy for internationalisation. Neither the SER nor the strategic plan refer to such strategy, nor was the team able to find out the existence of such a strategy during the site visits.

The teachers have very differing visions of internationalisation at Bioterra University, what it is today and where it should aim at. Some only refer to student mobility, while others try to make their teaching more open to global issues. A third group seemed to think that internationalisation means foreign languages.

Structures to support internationalisation in the university are under-developed. As the team learnt, there is no office dedicated to student mobility. Teachers are not assisted either for international education (e.g. how to join an Erasmus programme) nor are they in their research activities (e.g. how to bid for Europe). Most teachers try to help each other or to get support from colleagues external to Bioterra University. If it wants to become internationalised, *in the team's view, it should at least:*

- *Reconsider the objectives of internationalisation: what added value is expected?*
- *Establish the right structures,*
- *Provide sufficient funding,*
- *Open training and research to internationalisation (international programmes, international research projects),*
- *Design a student and faculty mobility policy,*
- *Foster international partnerships with European higher education institutions (the value of partnering with institutions from Egypt or Sudan should be carefully questioned),*
- *Take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the Erasmus programme.*

## 8. Conclusions

Bioterra University is a higher education institution in transition. Major achievements are visible and students are satisfied with their studies, most seem to enter the job market.

However, today the threats exceed the opportunities for development. The major threat lies with the dramatic decrease in student numbers that compromise the sustainability of the university's functioning. In addition, the foundation can no longer be the unique financial support of the university. The complex relationships between the two entities should definitely be clarified. Bioterra University needs to foster a fundraising campaign and seek for regular generation-income activities.

The team recommends the university to:

- Design a real strategic plan, including planning of existing and foreseen resources, implementation scheduling and a robust monitoring system
- Review the university's many objectives with the perspective of usefulness for the university future and visibility
- Design an operational plan that will constitute the road map for leaders and the community
- Take the sustainability issue seriously, as per funding is concerned
- Become autonomous or at least clarify its links with the foundation
- Commission an external audit of the role of the foundation vis-à-vis the university
- Give independence to the Ethics Committee
- Monitor scientific equipment and renew it when needed, designing and implementing an investment plan along with the operational plan
- Implement an overall research policy, aimed at applied research
- Seek ways to encourage its researchers to prioritise publishing in internationally referenced journals
- Develop lifelong learning programmes, with a view to better harnessing Bioterra University in the local environment and to generating external funds
- Continue to support the teachers' responsiveness to the labour market and society, by further matching the programmes with the eco-social requirements of the region and the country



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SUPERIOR, A CERCETĂRII,  
DEZVOLTĂRII ȘI INOVĂRII



- Foster entrepreneurship and take advantage of its proficient staff, its private status and its multiple locations to initiate small businesses along with education and research
- Fully endorse the “Bologna spirit”
- Promote a quality culture across the university according to the European standards and guidelines
- Keep up the expansion of profiled degrees, as needed by the current and future job market
- Disseminate the peer review of teachers across the university
- Develop alumni associations, destination surveys and collect data from graduates on labour market demand
- Set up mechanisms allowing a robust tracking of the functioning and management of the university and clarify the calculation and tracking of hours devoted to teaching and research
- Explore the added value of internationalisation and then define a relevant strategy by:
  - Reconsidering the objectives of internationalisation: what added value is expected?
  - Establishing the right structures
  - Providing sufficient funding
  - Opening training and research to internationalisation (international programmes, international research projects)
  - Designing a student and faculty mobility policy,
  - Fostering international partnerships with European higher education institutions (the value of partnering with institutions from Egypt or Sudan should be carefully questioned)
  - Take full advantage of the Erasmus programme