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Institutional Evaluation Programme

*Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and
Innovation in Romanian Universities Project*

BANAT'S UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES AND VETERINARY MEDICINE, TIMISOARA

EVALUATION REPORT

APRIL 2013

Team:

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Performance
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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Timisoara. The evaluation took place in November 2012 and March 2013 in the framework of the project "Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and Innovation in 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 Institutional Evaluation Programme (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 of quality in management

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. Banat’s University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Timisoara (BUASVMT) profile

Since its origins in 1945, the university has undergone a number of broadenings of its disciplinary portfolio and changes to its academic structure. In the context of the classification of higher education institutions under the 2011 Law on Education, BUASVMT is ranked among the universities of “teaching and scientific research universities”.

BUASVMT sees itself as a university of national importance in its disciplinary areas but with particular influence in western Romania and the cross-border (Romania, Serbia, Hungary) region of the Banat. It declares its mission to be multiple – education (teaching and learning), scientific research, academic extension and consultancy (service to society). It places particular emphasis on the training of specialists with a high level of scientific and technological skills to integrate into the industries served by its disciplinary portfolio so as to increase the competitiveness of those industries in a period of significant change. It does not however offer a discrete mission statement as such.

In its Institutional Development Strategic Plan 2012-2016, BUASVMT articulates a range of sub-strategies for management, finance and administration, human resources, teaching and learning, student relations, quality management, scientific research, learning resources and external (regional, national and international) engagements. However, a recurrent theme in the university’s discussions with the team was the inhibition upon the university’s further development arising from central government’s constraint upon higher education finance, especially in the context of the university’s second tier ranking and the associated centralisation of processes, approval mechanisms and decision-making, and the continuing validity of the national legislative framework for higher education.



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1.3. The self-evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a team of senior staff in a self-evaluation group appointed by the University's Administration Council (Executive) including the university's vice-rectors and director of doctoral school.

The self-evaluation group advised that the task of compiling the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) had been disaggregated to draw in informed input from across the university and that information had been collected and collated on their initiative from a wide number of university sources including via a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. This process did benefit the detail available in the SER but also led to a somewhat disjointed narrative lacking a unitary voice.

The SER was commented upon at a formative stage by the rector and Administrative Council (Executive) and in each faculty and was also made available for cross-university staff comment in a process coordinated by the Quality Management Department. The staff whom the evaluation team met confirmed that there had been broad staff engagement in the creation of the SER. The final version of the SER was made publicly available on the university website.

It was less clear what involvement the student body had had in the creation of the SER. The students whom the evaluation team met were not consistent in their recollection of any involvement or awareness of the SER. However, the guaranteed student membership of the university's deliberative academic committees which had considered the SER at formative stage, confirms that students had had an input even if it remained unclear to what level they had taken advantage of that opportunity.

The SER of BUASVMT, together with the appendices, was sent to the team in October 2012. The visits of the team to BUASVMT took place in November 2012 and March 2013, respectively. In between the visits, BUASVMT provided the team with some additional documentation requested, by the team, after the first visit.

The team consisted of:

- Bent Schmidt-Nielsen – Chair (First Visit), former Rector, Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University, Frederiksberg, Denmark
- Virgilio Meira Soares – Chair (Second Visit), former Rector, University of Lisbon, Portugal
- Derin Ural – Vice-President (Academic and International Affairs), Istanbul Technical University, Turkey



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- Stavros Koubias – former Rector, University of Patras, Greece
- Thomas Bach – MSc in Computer Science, University of Applied Science, Kaiserslautern, Germany. Currently at CERN, Switzerland
- Gregory Clark – Team Coordinator, Associate Secretary, University of Salford, United Kingdom

Professors Schmidt-Nielsen and Ural were prevented from continuing the evaluation to second visit stage due to illness. However, Prof Meira Soares kindly volunteered to chair the second visit to ensure the timely completion of the evaluation.

The team thanks the Rector, Professor Paul Pirsan, and all of his staff at BUASVMT for their engagement with the evaluation process and, in particular, thanks Associate Professor Camelia Tulcan for her tireless and helpful work as contact person with the team.



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2. Governance and institutional decision-making

BUASVMT comprises six faculties of eighteen departments in total and two doctoral schools and offers twenty-two undergraduate and twenty-six postgraduate taught programmes.

Executive management is provided by a rector, elected by all academic staff and those student representatives on Senate. The rector works through a senior executive team, the Administration Council. However, consistent with national legislation, a separate, regulatory Senate, chaired by a president, considers policy proposed by the rector. The Senate works through a number of commissions (sub-committees): student matters, international relations, didactic (teaching and learning), ethics, business extension and research.

This separation of powers is a source of potential conflict. However, the team was reassured that, apart from occasional filibustering, no significant conflict had arisen and that the rector and Senate had mitigated the risk of future conflict by the signing of a management contract.

The university's Strategic Plan exemplifies the university's decision-making process. The rector's election platform was the genesis of the current Institutional Development Strategic Plan 2012-2016 which was then further elaborated with the assistance of the Administration Council before presentation to and approval by Senate. The self-evaluation group's comments on the compilation of the SER and the omission of several of the usual elements in a strategic plan (locus of responsibility, timescale and key performance indicators) suggested to the team that strategic planning was not a process deeply embedded in the culture and working methods of BUASVMT. However, some of those missing elements were present in the annual operational plan, such as the Operational Plan for 2012, but even here key performance indicators were absent.

Faculties propose two candidates for dean for selection by the rector. Heads of departments are elected by academic staff. Deans and heads of school have a vital role in ensuring consistency in faculties and departments and mediating, informed by their staff, between university-led proposals initiated by the rector and Administration Council, of which deans are members, and the particular interests of faculties and departments. Nevertheless, the team was advised that deans had a responsibility to enforce the university's Strategic Plan.

Deans preside at Faculty Councils which operate commissions (sub-committees) mirroring those of Senate. Faculty strategies informed the university's strategy but the latter, for example its research strategy, was more than the sum of those six faculty strategies.

The factoring in of the "Student Voice" was facilitated by guaranteed student representative membership of at least 25% in Senate and Faculty Councils and their commissions.



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The university's support services are traditional in nature and comprise a large number of specific administrative units. University staff whom the team met consistently reported that central government restrictions on support staff recruitment and appointment caused the university significant difficulties in maintaining service levels and even impacted on key activities such as the maintenance of research equipment. The team found a committed administrative staff supportive of the university's senior management and the university's strategy. A prime example of that support is offered by the comprehensive and informed support provided by the Quality Management Department in embedding the university's quality culture.

From meetings with senior administrative staff, including the newly appointed general manager, the team heard confirmation of the SER's articulation of the university's aim to achieve greater efficiency through the rationalisation of support staffing. The team noted the creation of an informatics department and the appointment of a head of that department as evidence of that aim for greater efficiency with integrated collection of computerised management information allowing more informed decision-making across the university.

The team learnt that the internal allocation of finance was determined by the Administration Council and endorsed by Senate. Overall, with some top slicing, monies flowed through the faculties and departments following the students or activities carried out. Top slicing was higher for general income such as that from central government than for contract and commercial income. In effect, this meant that the university and faculties had limited pump-priming or seed corn monies available to resource new initiatives unless they could draw down external contract funding, especially from the EU.

Finally, the team heard frequently expressed concerns related to a perceived lack of autonomy including in such areas as over-bureaucratic recording and reporting processes, ranging across the full gamut of the university's activities from recruitment and appointment of staff, to student class contact hours, to eligibility to draw down research funding. Whilst acknowledging the reality of those constraints, the team believed the university nevertheless had significant scope to act decisively and strategically within the scope of its existing autonomy. The university had the scope to act proactively to address its own agenda rather than merely to react to constraints.



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Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university takes all necessary steps to ensure that the separation of responsibilities of the rector and Administrative Council and of Senate does not result in any future dispute disadvantageous to the university.
- That the university incorporates appropriate key performance indicators in its Strategic and Operational Plans to inform its decision-making.
- That the university builds on its creation of an informatics department to work towards the development of an integrated management information database to support the quality cycle of Plan>Do>Check>Act.
- That the university proactively concentrates upon maximising the use of its autonomy rather than merely reacting to national legislative changes.



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3. Teaching and learning

BUASVMT's teaching and learning strategy aims at improving and diversifying its current offer and ensuring its programmes are vocationally and professionally focused.

In terms of improvement of programmes, the university has embedded appropriate systems for approval, amendment, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes. These engaged successively department, faculty, Administrative Council and Senate and were consistent with the requirements of the national quality assurance agency, ARACIS, which intervened to quite a prescriptive level even to fixing normal contact hours for individual disciplines. The team met a wide group of committed teaching staff who sought continuously to improve teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, the ranking of study programmes, in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education, had placed a significant number of the university's study programmes in category B and even category C. The team was slightly surprised by the general university response to the sub-optimal ranking of study programmes. This ranking was welcomed in one sense as enabling the university to target resources for improvement or was ascribed to reasons beyond the university's control such as either the newness of the programmes or the ranking methodology and its ineluctable impact on the university's research standing. Whilst there was some minimal mention in strategic planning documentation of an aim to improving these rankings, the team felt that the university's profile would benefit considerably from such an improvement, especially with regard to programmes ranked C, being more actively addressed by operationalising such an aim and monitoring success through achievement of key performance indicators.

The team had a number of opportunities to debate with staff the SER's assertions in relation to the improvement of programmes through the applications of the Bologna Process. The team learnt of progress in the university's student-centred approach to teaching and learning and its direct application in practice across the majority of programmes. The position with regard to learning outcomes was less favourable with the team verifying and corroborating in discussion with students that they were mainly used to satisfy returns and specifications required by ARACIS rather than as effective tools for programme delivery and management and especially for assessment. The university similarly confirmed that the university's use of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) was limited to their embedding within internal documentation to comply with ARACIS requirements. They were otherwise virtually unknown within the university and not directly applied.



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In terms of diversification of programmes, the university cited the recent development of a revised postgraduate taught portfolio as illustrating academic staff's preparedness to engage with strategic change. However, the team also noted the inability of the university to deliver the growth of study programmes proposed in the strategic plan at undergraduate level in the face of small cohorts and decreased market demand. The specialisation of the university's programme portfolio might therefore be more achievable at postgraduate taught level.

The team also learnt of the university's ambitions to make greater use of alternative modes of candidature and especially distance learning and the further development of blended learning and the virtual learning environment. The team noted the university's initiatives to improve and to update its pedagogic approach, in distance learning and other aspects, by collaboration with international partners especially by drawing down EU project funding. However, the team wondered whether those ambitions might be more readily achieved by costing, prioritisation and operationalising of initiatives, especially as the university might be underestimating the overall costs of such developments.

The team noted the university's efforts so far, in a similar fashion, to diversify in terms of foreign language, and especially English language, delivery. This was limited and not broadly available and would undoubtedly improve the university's attractiveness to students. Again, the team encouraged the ambitions but saw these as needing to be better underpinned by costing, prioritisation and operationalising.

BUASVMT provided convincing evidence in the SER and in discussion with staff of the strong emphasis upon the vocational and professional nature of its programmes. This was fully corroborated by the majority of students, alumni and supportive external stakeholders. The team welcomed the university's emphasis on supplementing theoretical knowledge in the curricula with practical application and skills, including the use of placement opportunities with business and industry.

The team sought explanation of the sometimes high programme withdrawal rates which varied both across and within faculties. Although the national financial difficulties were a prime cause, senior academic staff emphasised the efforts made to publicise the availability of scholarships and other support and the systematising of personal tutoring through "Deans of Year" who monitored progress and established good relationships with individual students and even their families to encourage continuation on a programme.

The team was advised that vice-deans (didactic) had responsibility for academic staff development in their faculties and that Faculty Didactic Commissions through management reviews received information derived from module evaluations and consequent proposals for improvements in teaching and learning which could be actioned at faculty level or forwarded for approval by Administrative Council and Senate.



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Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university ensures that student-centred learning continues to be further developed and disseminated throughout the university.
- That the university ensures that learning outcomes are consistently applied and transparently available (for example in relation to assessment) throughout the university's taught provision.
- That the university continues to reinforce, throughout all curricula, its undoubted strengths in relation to its emphasis on the practical to supplement the theoretical.
- That the university plans, and prioritises within that plan, the rollout of appropriate foreign language (and especially English Language) provision.



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4. Research

In the team's view, research strategy presents perhaps the main challenge to the university's global strategy. BUASVMT has been included in the group of "teaching and scientific research universities" but aspires to become part of the "advanced research and teaching universities". To achieve that aspiration the university has itself identified areas it would need to strengthen starting with funding but extending to the building of academic staff's research capacity, of more academic research posts such as readers and more research support posts such as technicians, of earlier engagement of research students in research, of international research partnerships, of greater cross-faculty collaborations and interactions such as symposia and, from these various mechanisms, of research publications.

However, the university feels it is hampered in that research building, although not entirely prevented from it, by the implications of the new funding model and quality bars which limit the accessibility of state funding for research (although some staff believed that position might change), or in the view of some university staff bureaucratic constraints, on the level of proven research activity which academic staff had to evidence before being able to engage in research. This had a self-fulfilling impact in that staff not eligible to secure research funding found their workload balance increasingly weighted towards teaching and learning inhibiting scope for research.

Whilst sympathetic to these difficulties, the team felt that the university had firstly to address the focus of its research strategy and whether this should be fundamental/basic research offering greater international standing and more significant publications and potentially the opportunity to achieve first tier ranking, or applied research more suited to a second tier ranking and to a more extensive practical engagement with regional business and industry. The team had many opportunities to debate this matter with university staff, some of whom did not regard the two strands of research as necessarily mutually exclusive.

The team believed that this key decision on research focus, with significant impact on the university's future, was one which the university itself should take after careful internal and external consultation and discussion. Two major factors which should inform that decision were research funding and research performance of staff including their publications.

In the face of reduced central government research funding, the university advised that it was targeting partnerships with business and industry, especially in relation to contracts which had direct, early application, based on an interdisciplinary, problem-solving approach. In fact, however, on further investigation, the team identified that this activity constituted less than 1% of the university's overall income. Having discussed the matter at some length with the university's Consultative Council, the team believed there was clear potential for the university to engage more fully with its supportive external stakeholders in the generation of applied



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research contracts. The university had been more successful in collaboration with international and Romanian partner universities in drawing down EU project funding and the team encouraged the university to continue that activity.

As mentioned, the university itself had identified measures which might address improved staff research performance. In more detail, these included: incentivising, especially young researchers; supporting international conference attendance; granting research sabbaticals; encouraging staff to improve English language competence so as to extend the range of international partnership opportunities and publication of research in international (ISI) journals; establishing bidding teams to write more research proposals; and maximising the use of university facilities, especially on an interdisciplinary basis. However, these measures have yet to be operationalised. Research activity was a measure in the standard staff appraisal and promotion processes but there was incomplete systematic university-level evaluation with key performance indicators of staff research publications and impact, although some local level faculty monitoring was claimed.

The team noted that the university ran two doctoral schools which satisfactorily achieved their aim of fostering interdisciplinary research, creating critical mass in research and providing a good research environment for research students. In discussion, the team learnt of the university's aim to create, in due course when the level of research activity so justified, further doctoral schools perhaps eventually achieving one for each faculty. In the team's view, the present arrangements were suitable for the university's current state of development and offered better scope for the more efficient use of resources.

As has been noted, the university's research strategy was more than the sum of its faculty research strategies. The university had made significant research infrastructure investments, for example, in its Veterinary and Animal Science Centre and Cross-Disciplinary Research Platform, by drawing down on external, and especially EU, project funding. The team particularly commended the good practice demonstrated by the close staff involvement in the inception and design of the centre. The team noted, however, that the platform was not being used to capacity and saw this as symptomatic of the university's failure to fully exploit its successful research areas and to disseminate better research practice through interdisciplinarity, mentoring and guidance. The university has areas of high performance in research and should, within the context of its consideration of research focus, more clearly articulate and operationalise how those areas might beneficially build research expertise and capacity across the university.



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Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university considers the appropriate focus for its research strategy (applied or fundamental research) consulting internally with staff through seminars or similar activities and externally with the Consultative Council and other stakeholders.
- That the university promotes greater interdisciplinarity in its research so as to maximise its exploitation of staff expertise and of facilities (for example the research platform).
- That the university systematises the monitoring of staff research performance (including quality and volume of publications and income) and uses that monitoring to inform decisions on any necessary pump priming or funding.
- That the university gives cautious consideration to its intended future development of discrete doctoral schools, weighing whether this might risk failure to achieve critical mass and might dissipate resources.
- That the university formalises its dissemination, cross-university, of identified strengths and good practice in research.



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5. Service to society

The team had corroborated in its meetings with staff and with external stakeholders BUASVMT's renewed emphasis on its aspiration to be even more responsive to business and industry. The team learnt of the high level of interaction and cooperation between the university and the private sector. The establishment of a Consultative Council of external stakeholders was intended to give a more strategic focus to this interaction and cooperation.

The external stakeholders whom the team met as Consultative Council members expressed not only goodwill towards the university but also an appreciation of the value of the university to business and industry in their region: up-to-date programme curricula achieving industry standard and usually designed or amended with the direct involvement of external stakeholders; the preparedness of the university to provide programme curricula which met industry skill shortages; mutually beneficial practice placements which were often the prelude to permanent recruitment; the practical skills and vocational preparedness of BUASVMT graduates as employees; the provision of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and accredited postgraduate programmes enabling employees to meet the updating requirements of professional bodies; and BUASVMT as a venue and showcase for and promoter of industry, especially agriculture.

To a lesser extent, the external stakeholders welcomed BUASVMT's offer in relation to shared research technology transfer; consultancy and commercial contracts; and the further development of current employees through postgraduate research programmes or the location of research students within businesses for the generation of their research data. Such interactions were seen as key to the exploration of new techniques, the acquisition and testing of new equipment and the updating of employees in developing industry practices. With some exceptions, however, external stakeholders placed greater value on the more immediate impact resultant from teaching and learning than from the longer term benefits accruing from research and consultancy.

Engagement with external stakeholders is mirrored at faculties which have advisory boards similar to the Consultative Council and external employers represented on faculty councils. Faculties offer opportunities for professional practitioners to offer guest lectures on study programmes, receive systematic but non-assessed feedback of practice placements and consult business and industry on updating of study programmes.

The team, however, felt that the university might wish to apply a more strategic focus on the targeting of its external engagement. The team heard more than once from the staff it met



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that the university felt a continuing obligation to support the development of small and medium enterprises and especially family farms. The university continued to compensate for a national lack of post-school education provision at what might better be described as pre-higher rather than higher education. This lower level training activity might more usually be provided in the post-school vocational sector. That service to the regional community was worthy in intent but somewhat dissipated the university's attention to potentially more lucrative research and consultancy contracts with large and multinational business. The team noted, for example, the limited exploitation through spin-off enterprise of the university's research.

The team was shown the university's efforts to service all the needs of the student, and to some extent local community, by the provision of a wide range of services from medical centres, to residential accommodation and kindergarten and even a new Orthodox church on campus. The team was disappointed that local civic leaders were not well represented in the external stakeholders whom the team met, despite the university's clear commitment to service to the regional and local community.

Many of the external stakeholders whom the team met were themselves graduates of the university and their support for the university was based not only on mutual interest but also on affection for and gratitude to the university. The team felt that the establishment of an active alumni association could channel and develop the university's wider service to society from bringing their experience and expertise directly into study programmes to broadening the range of services promoted commercially to business and industry. The team noted the minimal promotion of such services, for example its accredited laboratories, to external stakeholders and the wider market.

Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university continues to work actively with external stakeholders and, in particular, takes advantage of the goodwill and business expertise and experience of its Consultative Council.
- That the university reviews the promotion of its services (such as its accredited laboratories) to external stakeholders and the wider market.



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6. Quality culture

The team was positively impressed by the efforts invested by BUASVMT in the creation of a quality culture and quality assurance system(s) in the university. Senior staff whom the team met set this in the context of national developments and the greater opening to external practices over a twenty-year period.

The team received evidence that the quality culture and awareness of and participation in quality systems was well embedded at all levels of the university, that these systems were apparently being applied in a consistent manner, and that beneficial results were beginning to result as implementation was rolled out.

The university had obtained ISO 9001 certification and underpinned that certification with a comprehensive set of regulations and documentation including user manuals. The university had also successfully obtained other specific quality management approvals for particular activities such as its accredited laboratories.

The team believed ISO 9001 norms to be a possible sound choice for the quality assurance of the university's support and administrative activities but doubted their suitability for core educational processes in teaching and learning and in research. The team was surprised at the university's failure strategically to address the improvement of study programmes categorised as B and C and, explicitly, to take account of the European Standards and Guidelines. See Section 3, Teaching and Learning, above.

The team was informed that the university believed itself now to be at a sufficiently advanced stage in its development of quality systems comprehensively to define and articulate its quality processes. The team was happy for that activity to be carried out and saw it additionally as an opportunity to take explicit account of the European Standards and Guidelines. It would also be opportune for the university to ensure that all its quality processes, including feedback to students on their representations on proposals for improvement, supported the quality cycle of Plan > Do > Check > Act.

The team corroborated that study programmes were regularly monitored and reviewed at, successively, departmental, faculty, institutional and national levels. The university complied with ARACIS requirements in this regard but the team was also convinced that this monitoring and review went beyond mere compliance and reflected conscientious academic staff engagement, duly informed by student views, with the delivery and development of their study disciplines.



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The team was satisfied that students took the opportunity offered by the university academic quality assurance system to participate, not only by attendance at institutional and faculty level deliberative committees and commissions but also by mechanisms such as the completion of questionnaires and surveys. Students believed they could raise proposals for improvement and debate proposals for improvement raised by staff. One recurrent theme amongst students whom the team met however was that, although they believed they had the opportunity to have their voice heard, they did not receive feedback on any action taken on proposals for improvement. The team believed that relatively simple expedients such as making available to all students, via the Intranet, all relevant reports and minutes from meetings of deliberative committees could address the issue. Similarly, the university could look at creating institutional email addresses for all students as a means of disseminating not just practical, operational information but also outputs related to academic quality assurance.

The team believed the division of responsibilities and working arrangements between the central Quality Management Department and the university and faculty commissions (CEACs) appeared to be functioning effectively and was well respected across the university. The Quality Management Department coordinates and applies the internal quality manual and external (ARACIS) requirements through the articulation of procedures, criteria and standards. The CEAC, at university level, develops for Senate approval the quality assurance model and, at faculty level, ensures its implementation. Their quality assurance work is supplemented by a cross-university system of internal quality audit, checking compliance and measuring impact. The Quality Management Department is a small but discrete support unit whereas CEACs are staffed by academic staff who also have teaching and research duties within their faculties.

The Quality Management Department also discharged a responsibility in relation to staff development and training in relation to the university's academic quality assurance system. The team was informed that broader academic staff development was vested in each faculty's vice-dean (Didactic). The team heard from a range of academic staff whom it met that the provision of this broader academic staff development was variable. There was also minimal provision, other than recourse to guidance from senior colleagues who had been previous role holders for senior staff newly taking up leadership and management responsibilities. Similarly, career development advice was limited.

The Quality Management Department relies for its extensive data collection on manual systems and ad hoc spreadsheets which therefore constitute a laborious and time-consuming workload. The team believes that the Quality Management Department should be a prime beneficiary of the university's creation of an informatics department and the appointment of a head of that department. See Section 2, Governance and Institutional Decision-Making, above.



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Academic staff appointments were determined at faculty level. Many staff whom the team met expressed concern at the impact of a central government moratorium on appointments and the consequent greater teaching workloads for other staff. Several senior academic staff had to balance a heavy workload of teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. Academic staff line management was at department level and heads of department carried out teaching observation.

The team confirmed that a range of mandatory mechanisms were in place for the evaluation of staff. Academic staff were evaluated from a number of viewpoints: by self-evaluation, by peers, by line managers and by students. The team learnt that very high ranking in those evaluations or other comparative evidence of outstanding performance, such as in research publications, could result in financial reward. The resultant outcomes from negative evaluations were more opaque with a heavy emphasis on the offering of remedial opportunities before directive or disciplinary action was invoked. The team believed that, although the university was meeting its obligations with regard to the mandatory evaluations of staff, for example, in relation to promotion via submission of "opposition", it might wish to develop its own more objective criteria and indicators for staff evaluation to inform staff development across the range of university activities and the allocation of resources, including incentivisation.

The university demonstrated regular monitoring, through assessment, of student achievement. The university complied with national requirements in relation to the (input) admission standards for its student and it evidenced high output standards by reference to the high levels of employability and the high demand for BUASVMT graduates amongst key employers. The university, more informally, monitored the standard of its estate, infrastructure and facilities by anecdotal comparison with those available to its international collaborative partners.

Overall student satisfaction was high and the students whom the team met felt engaged in the university's quality culture, especially via student representation at university and faculty (but not department) level. The same students, who included officers of the student league, student representatives and "ordinary" students, were unanimous in reporting the university's library and IT provision to be entirely sufficient and satisfactory. There was, however, some dissatisfaction with the equipping of specialist facilities such as the didactic station and livestock levels on the university farm.

The students whom the team met were satisfied with all stages of their student life cycle: recruitment, accuracy and availability of information, induction, personal tutoring, practice placement and assessment including the availability of clear assessment criteria. Students had awareness of where to find information on complaint and appeals mechanisms and of the university's code of student rights, required to be in place by central government. The students



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had a high regard for the reputation of the university and praised the commitment and support of their lecturers. The students placed a high value on the university's emphasis on employability, shown in the vocational nature of curricula, in the practice placement opportunities and university support whilst on placement and in the availability, both centrally and via year tutors, of careers advice and guidance. The university student community also supports an active student league. The students were enthusiastic about Timisoara as a city but the team did not investigate their broader engagement with the local region and society.

The team also met research students who were similarly supportive of the university and their supervisors. They confirmed the standard university quality assurance provisions and maxima for admission, supervision, progression and assessment to be being duly applied. They confirmed the opportunities for interdisciplinary research and for active participation in the university's research activities. They reported appropriate training, including for teaching and post-doctoral activity, to be available.

Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university ensures that all relevant documentation and minutes of meetings, considering recommendations for improvement, are widely publicised in the university (for example via the Intranet).
- That the development of an integrated management information database (already mentioned) prioritises support to data collection by the Quality Management Department.
- That, at a time when the university is anyway redefining its quality processes, it acts now to inform its quality assurance systems for teaching and learning by direct reference to the European Standards Guidelines.
- That the university develops more objective criteria and indicators for the evaluation of staff.
- That the university ensures that all its quality assurance processes “close the loop” and support the quality cycle of Plan>Do>Check>Act.



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7. Internationalisation

In the team's view, on the basis of the detailed documentation provided by the university and discussions with staff and students, including those with international experience and including staff and students visiting the university, the level of internationalisation is below that which might be reasonably expected of an institution with BUASVMT's aspirations, even taking a basic measure such as staff and student mobility.

With limited exceptions, particularly some already well-established transfrontier interactions, there is a low level of collaborative engagements with Europe and the rest of the world. Some of the staff whom the team met reported visits within the EU and to the United States of America and there was a limitedly upward trend in international collaborations, especially through EU-funded projects. It was especially disappointing to the team that there was not a higher overall level of research collaboration.

The team found the university basically consistent with the Bologna Process. The university claimed its quality assurance practice was informed by that in the European Area of Higher Education. The university offered its provision in the three cycles of higher education, recognised foreign qualifications for admission and advanced standing and used the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The university's approach to student-centred learning and to learning outcomes and its lack of awareness of the European Standards and Guidelines have already been reported in Section 3, Teaching and Learning, above. The student body, including the Student League, appeared to have minimal knowledge of the level of student engagement in academic quality assurance elsewhere in the EU.

The university currently offers no joint awards with international partners but is currently taking forward an initiative for a joint Masters award with Hungarian and Slovenian partners which, if followed through, could create a template and incentive for future similar initiatives.

The team believed a low level of confidence and/or competence in foreign languages, and especially the English language, was an important factor in the lack of international engagements. The university, with some additional state funding, had introduced a limited amount of English language delivery and general English language support for students. However, any further rollout would also require greater competence amongst staff. Several of the students whom the team met were aware of the English language provision and generally found such provision attractive but were reconciled to non-participation because of the cost, the limited availability of the provision or their own perceived level of competence.

The university's need to attract more students, nationally and internationally, should, in the team's view, be a driving force to improve its image and project its profile. Increased English



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language provision could only strengthen opportunities for recruitment and the attractiveness of the university.

Nevertheless, the team found many individuals, both staff and students, who were able to speak the English language sufficiently fluently, although not perfectly. In the team's view, that lack of perfection should not be a reason to temper a more proactive attitude towards international collaboration. On the contrary, that starting point of sufficiency should offer an incentive and a reason for individuals to improve their proficiency in the English language. Moreover, the university should complement that individual action by providing support for further improved proficiency in the English language as well as for those staff and students with a lower level of English language competence. Improved English language proficiency would also of course greatly assist research active staff in achieving higher levels of publication in international journals.

The team found a reasonable awareness of the BUASVMT international office and ERASMUS amongst the students whom it met and, indeed, met some strong advocates of the experienced benefits of international mobility. Students reported receipt of targeted email communications and briefings from the ERASMUS coordinator. The university might however find other mechanisms to promote student mobility including ERASMUS: clear endorsement from senior academic staff, special fellowships supported by alumni donations as established in veterinary medicine, and overall clearer strategising, with appropriate timelines and key performance indicators, of its further exploitation of ERASMUS.

The team also believed that the university should aim quantitatively and qualitatively to improve the scope of its international research collaborations as a necessary part of the greater focusing of its research strategy recommended in Section 4, Research, above, not just so as to enhance the likely success of research project bids, especially to EU funds, but also to enhance the general level of internationalisation of the university.

Recommendations

The team recommends:

- That the university develops a framework for the cross-university management or co-ordination of English language provision so as to facilitate increased international collaborations for both research active staff and postgraduate research students.
- That the university strategises, with appropriate key performance indicators, its further exploitation of the ERASMUS programme.



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- That the university, at an early stage, evaluates the current development of its joint Masters programme with international partners to satisfy itself on the quality of the provision and to inform future similar developments.

and, though not directly the university's responsibility, the team recommends:

- that the student league seeks out national and international contacts to broaden its knowledge of student representation and especially the involvement of students in the quality assurance of teaching and learning and research.



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8. Conclusion

The team found BUASVMT to be a university proud of its past and its traditions but one already beginning to undergo a high level of significant transitional change in a volatile, national higher education context. The staff, whom the team met were open-minded and frank and engaged well, and sometimes robustly, in debate with the team. The students and external stakeholders whom the team met were supportive of and grateful to the university and were an asset to the university.

The university has an overt ambition to be ranked in the first tier of research-focused universities but faces considerable challenges to achieve that ambition and not solely the challenges of limitations on funding. This report sets out how BUASVMT might address those challenges but three key challenges in particular should be highlighted:

- the need to make use of its autonomy whatever the actual or anticipated national level constraints;
- the need to formalise its strategic and operational planning and especially the need to incorporate performance indicators;
- and the associated need within its strategic planning to determine the appropriate focus for its research.

With a new executive team in place and towards the beginning of an aspirational new strategic plan, with supportive staff, students and external stakeholders, including alumni, BUASVMT should be well placed to rise to the challenges faced.

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

- That the university takes all necessary steps to ensure that the separation of responsibilities of the rector and Administrative Council and of Senate does not result in any future dispute disadvantageous to the university.
- That the university incorporates appropriate key performance indicators in its strategic and Operational Plans to inform its decision-making.



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- That the university builds on its creation of an informatics department to work towards the development of an integrated management information database to support the quality cycle of Plan>Do>Check>Act.
- That the university proactively concentrates upon maximising the use of its autonomy rather than merely reacting to national legislative change.
- That the university ensures that student-centred learning continues to be further developed and disseminated throughout the university.
- That the university ensures that learning outcomes are consistently applied and transparently available (for example in relation to assessment) throughout the university's taught provision.
- That the university continues to reinforce, throughout all curricula, its undoubted strengths in relation to its emphasis on the practical to supplement the theoretical.
- That the university plans, and prioritises within that plan, the rollout of appropriate foreign language (and especially English language) provision.
- That the university considers the appropriate focus for its research strategy (applied or fundamental research) consulting internally with staff through seminars or similar activities and externally with the Consultative Council and other stakeholders.
- That the university promotes greater interdisciplinarity in its research so as to maximise its exploitation of staff expertise and of facilities (for example the research platform).
- That the university systematises the monitoring of staff research performance (including quality and volume of publications and income) and uses that monitoring to inform decisions on any necessary pump priming or funding.
- That the university gives cautious consideration to its intended future development of discrete doctoral schools, weighing whether this might risk failure to achieve critical mass and might dissipate resources.
- That the university formalises its dissemination, cross-University, of identified strengths and good practice in research.
- That the university continues to work actively with external stakeholders and, in particular, takes advantage of the goodwill and business expertise and experience of its Consultative Council.



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- That the university reviews the promotion of its services (such as its accredited laboratories) to external stakeholders and the wider market.
- That the university ensures that all relevant documentation and minutes of meetings, considering recommendations for improvement, are widely publicised in the university (for example via the Intranet).
- That the development of an integrated management information database (already mentioned) prioritises support to data collection by the Quality Management Department.
- That, at a time when the university is anyway redefining its quality processes, it acts now to inform its quality assurance systems for teaching and learning by direct reference to the European Standards Guidelines.
- That the university develops more objective criteria and indicators for the evaluation of staff.
- That the university ensures that all its quality assurance processes “close the loop” and support the quality cycle of Plan>Do>Check>Act.
- That the university develops a framework for the cross-university management or coordination of English language provision so as to facilitate increased international collaborations for both research active staff and postgraduate research students.
- That the university strategises, with appropriate key performance indicators, its further exploitation of the ERASMUS programme.
- That the university, at an early stage, evaluates the current development of its joint Masters programme with international partners to satisfy itself on the quality of the provision and to inform future similar developments.

and, though not directly the university’s responsibility, the team recommends:

- That the student league seeks out national and international contacts to broaden its knowledge of student representation and especially the involvement of students in the quality assurance of teaching and learning and research.