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Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

“Drăgan” European University of Lugoj

EVALUATION REPORT

July 2014

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Quality and Diversity
of the Romanian Universities





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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the “Drăgan” European University of Lugoj (DEU) by the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP). 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). The IEP offers evaluations to support higher education institutions in the ongoing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

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

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

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



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

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

1.2 The profile of “Drăgan” European University of Lugoj

DEU is a small university built around two faculties of economics and law, offering a defined range of academic programmes at Bachelor and Master levels through those faculties. DEU is a not-for-profit institution, a legal entity of private law and public utility, founded in 1992 by Professor J. C. Drăgan and the “Drăgan” European Foundation. The university is now owned and ultimately governed by this foundation, and its income is derived from student fees, research monies, other earned income and philanthropy.

According to the DEU self-evaluation report and annexes, during the 2013-14 academic year there were approximately 532 students at the university, approximately two-thirds of these in the Faculty of Economics and one-third in the Faculty of Law. According to the data in the self-evaluation report, almost 80% of DEU students are Bachelor-level students, with the remainder on Masters or other postgraduate programmes.

Like all universities in Romania, the student numbers at DEU have also been affected by the important demographic decline due to the low birth rate in Romania. At DEU, this has resulted in a 50% decrease in student numbers between 2010-2011 and 2013-2014, with the decline spread more or less evenly between the two faculties and across both Bachelor and Master levels.

During the 2013-14 academic year, DEU employed 22 tenured academic staff, and a further 24 non-tenured teaching staff and 13 administration and maintenance staff. A majority (59%) of teaching staff are at lecturer level, and 32% at professor or associate professor levels. The student/teacher ratio for 2013-14, as per the data in the self-evaluation report, averaged 17.1:1 across DEU, with 19.8:1 in the Faculty of Economics and 13.9:1 in the Faculty of Law.

DEU’s stated mission is to offer higher education at the highest possible level in the fields of law and economics in order to educate top specialists in these fields, training them for professional life as proactive citizens in a democratic society, to preserve and expand through teaching, learning and research, a body of complex and advanced knowledge, and to prepare students for sustainable employment. This mission was determined by DEU’s founders, and is intended to serve the western region of Romania, from DEU’s base in Lugoj.



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The IEP evaluation team (hereinafter, the team) found strong evidence that this mission is very much alive today, with a strong focus by DEU on the town of Lugoj and its surrounding region, enjoying exceptionally strong support from a broad range of local stakeholders.

In addition to its stated mission, DEU has taken on a de facto lead role in making higher education available and a viable option for a whole range of students who, for a variety of reasons, would be unlikely to attend a more traditional university. The size of DEU is a clear strength in this regard, as is the close and positive relationship between students and academic staff. The team found strong evidence of DEU students' support for their university, with students highly appreciative of the sense of community and the culture of respect that permeates DEU.

While the choice of programmes available at DEU was limited to those in the fields of economics and law by the founders, the team found that this narrow range may now in reality be preventing artificially the university from pursuing its broader mission in educating students to become skilled professionals and active citizens across a broader range of sustainable fields which are required in Lugoj and more broadly in western Romania.

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a self-evaluation committee led by the chairman of the DEU quality assessment and assurance board. The group also included the dean of the Faculty of Economics, a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Law, the director of the international relations department, the university chief registrar, and a Master's student at the Faculty of Economics.

The self-evaluation report and appendices contained a large amount of useful data and information. It was clear to the team that a great deal of effort and care had gone into compiling the report; this was the first time that such a report and this type of self-analysis had been produced at DEU; the team was informed that this process had also been useful for the university in considering its own norms and values, mission and strategy, and longer term options.

The DEU self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was made available for the evaluation team in mid-January 2014. The two visits of the evaluation team to DEU took place from 12 to 14 February 2014 and from 7 to 9 May 2014 respectively. In between the visits, the team requested some additional documentation, mostly in the fields of teaching and learning, research and international relations, which was provided by DEU.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Fuada Stanković, former Rector, University of Novi Sad, Serbia, chair



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- Laust Jakobsen, Rector, University College Copenhagen, Denmark
- Erazem Bohinc, Master of Law student, European Faculty of Law, Slovenia
- Lewis Purser, Director of Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association, Ireland, coordinator

The team would like to thank the Rector, Prof. Dr Persida Cechin-Crista, and Dr Alina Nistorescu, the DEU liaison person, for their warm welcome and good organisation of the visits to DEU, and for the very open and constructive discussions, which characterised the team visits to the university.

The IEP methodology has a limited capacity to verify facts or statements made in the self-evaluation report; the evaluation process is largely based on verbal information and self-reporting, built around on two short visits by the IEP evaluation team. The methodology is built on trust, and is designed as a process aimed at supporting the university in the continuing development of its strategic management and internal quality culture. This makes it a very different process to accreditation.

Given these limitations, it is not always possible to clarify contradictory or conflicting statements, which may appear in the self-evaluation report or in other documentation provided, or which arise during the two site visits. If such situations arise, where the evaluation team is not able to reach a firm conclusion despite its best efforts to clarify issues during the series of interviews, this will be stated in the report and the contradictions/alternatives presented; it is then up to DEU to draw its own conclusions, based on its own internal assessment.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 Background

Since its foundation in 1992, DEU has been structured in two faculties, economics and law. Within each faculty, in accordance with Romanian requirements, can be found departments (currently one department in each faculty) and research centres. Each department is responsible for the delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; the number of these programmes has varied over the years based on the levels of student demand. DEU does not provide doctoral education.

Given the significant demographic changes in DEU's catchment area, the western region of Romania, there is currently only one Bachelor and one Master programme in each department (thus also in each faculty), although both departments also run a number of postgraduate courses of continuing professional development and training. The team was



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informed of a number of possible ideas and early-stage initiatives to introduce new programmes in the coming years.

DEU is governed by a Board of Trustees, chaired by the president, the widow of DEU's founder, Prof. Drăgan. There are four other members of the Board, apart from the president; these include the former DEU rector, the DEU administrative director, a representative of the "Drăgan" European Foundation, and a professor from Italy. The Board of Trustees has ultimate responsibility for the approval of the DEU budget and for all financial and administrative issues, including DEU property and investments.

As per the regulations in force in Romanian higher education, the DEU Senate is elected by the full-time tenured staff from each faculty, with 25% of Senate members being student representatives. The Senate validates the choice of rector (who is directly elected by all tenured academic staff), receives the rector's regular reports, and approves teaching and research plans from the faculties and research centres, as well as reports from a number of Senate committees in areas such as quality assurance, ethics and professional conduct, and international relations. Students are represented in all these Senate committees. The Senate receives the proposed DEU budget from the rector, and can amend this, although final control in this area remains with the Board of Trustees. In reality, any Senate recommendation with financial consequences is brought to the Board of Trustees for decision.

The administrative director is responsible for human resources, finance, property and administration, and reports to the Board of Trustees. The general secretary reports to the rector and is responsible for all secretariat activities, (e.g., student admissions, faculty and branch campus secretariats, public relations, etc.).

2.2 Analysis

The team spent a considerable time discussing the topic of DEU governance and decision-making during its two visits to Lugoj, involving a wide range of groups from both academic and administrative functions as well as with a representative of the foundation.

During these discussions the team emphasised the methodology of the Institutional Evaluation Programme, built around the questions mentioned in section 1.1:

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



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The mission of the university is clear, well-articulated, and widely known both within DEU and among its stakeholder community. This mission has remained constant since DEU's foundation in 1992. This is clearly one of DEU's governance and management strengths, along with its hard working and committed leadership, its disciplined and effective financial management, and its proven ability to take difficult decisions at the right moment.

However, given the challenges DEU currently faces – particularly in terms of student numbers but also in ensuring that it will continue to be in an optimal position to serve the needs of Lugoj and the wider region – the team learned that considerations were currently underway to expand DEU beyond the two faculties of economics and law, and thus introduce new elements to its mission. Such a move would appear to have the support of both the senior university leadership and the Foundation, and would see DEU aiming to introduce a number of complementary programmes to its existing portfolio, and seek to reposition itself as an entrepreneurial university.

This would also help overcome one of DEU's main weaknesses in terms of governance and decision making, namely that of a limited shared vision across DEU for the longer-term future of the university. While such future developments should be approached with confidence, any proposed changes would need to retain DEU's current focus on the student experience and quality, while also aiming to increase its reputation and future profile, including its research capacity.

Given the small size of the university, and the challenges it is facing, as identified through the self-evaluation report, the need for effective governance and decision-making structures and processes is clear. However, another of the main DEU weaknesses identified by the team is that of over-complicated internal structures, which negate many of the advantages derived from DEU's strengths. For example, while there are currently only one Bachelor and one Master programme on offer in each faculty, an academic department exists within each faculty to manage these programmes, with parallel academic infrastructure at both department and faculty levels. The same exists in terms of research activity, which is structured through research centres within each faculty, even though the overall level of activity is rather low.

These parallel infrastructures involve a great deal of staff time and other resources, with – from the team's perspective – no appreciable benefits for either DEU students or staff. While the team was informed that many of these structures and requirements are a consequence of the various national normative requirements and ARACIS criteria and evaluation methodologies, it would encourage DEU to simplify them to the greatest extent possible, and to use them as best as it can to pursue its own goals and to improve quality for students and stakeholders. Given the discussions currently underway regarding adapting DEU's mission, involving the Senate and the Foundation, there may also be scope to look at adapting DEU's internal structures, including its governance and institutional decision-making structures.



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In order to adapt to changing student demographics and reduced student fee income, DEU has reduced its number of academic staff in recent years. This is evidence of DEU's ability to take difficult decisions, and to use internal data through student evaluations, staff evaluations, publications data, in reaching these decisions. The work done by these staff members has been redistributed among the remaining staff. However, this reduction in DEU teaching staff has had knock-on effects on another DEU weakness, that a number of important functions which are key to DEU's future developments – such as the international office, the research office and the quality assurance office – rely on staff who already have a number of teaching and other responsibilities, without adequate professional support and backup.

These specific areas will be discussed in more detail later in this report, but it is clear to the team that in order for DEU to succeed in a number of areas where it has legitimate ambitions, it will need to invest in new skills to support these and other key functions.



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3. Teaching and learning

Given the mission, profile and structures of DEU, the theme of teaching and learning is a particularly important one, and one in which all internal and external partners and DEU stakeholders also showed a strong interest. Starting from the data and analysis provided to the team through the DEU self-evaluation report and additional documentation, the team engaged in informative and stimulating discussions on the broad topic of teaching and learning with a wide range of groups and actors from across DEU, including students. In addition, the team benefited from considerable feedback from DEU's external partners, including employers, regarding these broad topics.

One of the strongest points to arise from this process was the student-centred and student-friendly philosophy in evidence at DEU. While it is true that student numbers are small, DEU has turned this into one of its explicit strengths, ensuring that students are happy with their teachers and programmes, and that employers are happy with the quality of DEU graduates. In this situation, DEU staff are able to spend more time with each student, and also to work with them closely in informal settings outside the classroom. These were mentioned repeatedly by students in discussions with the team. The strong sense of DEU community, within the broader Lugoj environment, also means that students return to DEU even after graduation to seek advice from their former teachers and mentors.

This student-centred philosophy also translates into very low student dropout rates at DEU. The team was informed that this is around 1% and that, as a small community, DEU can ensure that the problems of each individual are addressed in a suitable way. In a student population where a large proportion is also in employment (between 40-50% of all students, according to oral information provided during the visits), this attention to the needs of individuals and the flexibility to meet and discuss with professors is important. This flexible approach can also include allowing certain administrative facilities to those students who struggle to make their quarterly fee payments.

The openness of this relationship between DEU and its students is complemented by the reality that most DEU academic staff are also professionally active in their fields. This allows professors to ensure that their teaching is grounded in professional reality, which can translate into real professional knowledge, skills and competences for their students. It also means that professors are in a position to provide effective advice regarding career options and other professional support, including when students seek placements or internships to support their academic and career development. These factors were regularly cited by students as key strengths of DEU, and were sometimes decisive in individual students' decisions regarding where and what to study. Greater coherence between these effective informal approaches to career development and the DEU Career Counselling Centre, of which most students had not heard, would certainly be of benefit in ensuring that as many DEU



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students and graduates as possible can progress in their careers in the most suitable ways possible.

Within this positive overall philosophy for teaching and learning at DEU, the team also identified a number of areas where innovations or improvements could be considered.

From a detailed examination of academic programme documentation from both faculties, the team was surprised by the limited scope within these for elective or optional modules and subjects. While the team understands that accreditation and professional requirements must be met in each programme, it would encourage DEU to consider how programmes could be made more dynamic, introducing greater options for individual students to pursue particular areas of interest for their own academic or professional purposes. A greater focus on possible interdisciplinarity across the fields already provided by DEU, and with those new fields currently under consideration, would certainly benefit many students and also be of interest to external partners and employers. There is also scope for the refreshing of these programmes following EU membership (e.g. some coverage of European law) and the integration of new elements – both for undergraduate students and practicing professionals – following recent changes in the Romanian legal system and economic environment. The team heard a number of suggestions from stakeholders and employers in these regards.

The team heard frequent requests from students for greater flexibility in the delivery of classes and in the availability of learning materials from the library. Given the number of students who have employment commitments and who are only able to come to DEU outside their normal working hours, this would appear to be an important matter for DEU to consider, in the overall framework of enhancing its student-centred philosophy.

Likewise, the team heard of a proposal being developed by students to ensure that the methodology and timing of assessment and examinations be as progressive as possible across the entire university, integrating such concepts as continuous assessment. External stakeholders also mentioned the importance of ensuring that students were fully involved in various active learning strategies, for example through practical projects, and that there was sufficient time in the curriculum for this.

These suggestions, along with many other possible innovations in the teaching and learning process, would allow DEU to focus to a greater extent on the learning outcomes of this process, and to make better use of concepts such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and be more conscious of variations in student workload across different courses. The team considered that a greater focus on learning outcomes and how these could be assessed within DEU generally would benefit the overall teaching and learning process at the university, and support DEU's overall mission.



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The issue of internationalisation is important in ensuring that DEU's mission continues to be fulfilled in the years to come. Romanian society and the Romanian economy, particularly in western Romania, continue to be influenced by European and international developments. These also impact on the needs of stakeholders and the options open for DEU students and graduates. In the field of teaching and learning, this topic was also openly discussed during the team's meetings at DEU, and considered by all groups – both internal and external – to be an area, which needed considerable improvements. The university will need to consider, at every level, how the internationalisation of DEU programmes can be improved, not just through a greater emphasis on competence in a foreign language for both students and staff. There are considerable opportunities to internationalise the curriculum and other elements of the teaching and learning process. This topic will be covered in greater depth later in this report.



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4. Research

Research has until recently played a relatively minor role within DEU's strategy, priorities and range of activities. However, this is currently in the process of changing, since good research is acknowledged as an important route to the improved quality of teaching, to new sources of income, and also to the development of additional expertise in the fields, which are key to DEU's mission and its contribution to regional development. Research is also seen as an important element in promoting the internationalisation of DEU. For these reasons, the DEU leadership has recently begun to place increased emphasis on the research activity and performance of all DEU academic staff as a necessary complement to staff teaching activity.

The approach used up to now at DEU for the choice of research topics and activities is very much a grass-roots process. The team was informed that the staff from each faculty meet at the beginning of each academic year, within the relevant faculty research centres (two in economics, one in law), to make proposals regarding the different conferences or topics they would like to become involved in. Faculty research plans are developed through this approach, and are then forwarded to the Department of Scientific Research and European projects (created in 2013), and then approved by the Senate. The team was informed that these same staff then meet on a monthly basis within their respective research centres to monitor the implementation of these research plans and how objectives are met. The modest income gained from a number of applied projects commissioned by local partners is used to complement the faculty income raised from student fees.

While allowing for staff members to propose and develop their own research activities, this approach has obvious limitations — particularly when levels of research activity are low — and does not appear to be conducted in any strategic way. The team learned that there were very few examples of research projects involving both DEU faculties, or exploring interdisciplinary themes. DEU has not yet had any success in securing European funding for a research project (or any other project), and the number of research projects at DEU in receipt of competitive national funding is likewise minimal. Given the size of the university and the nature of disciplines and staff profiles currently available, it is clear that new strategic approaches to research are needed if DEU is to pursue its ambitions of ensuring that all staff are active and productive in research as well as teaching.

Therefore, the creation in 2013 of the Department of Scientific Research and European projects was welcomed by the team as a strong statement of such a new strategy. A Director has been appointed to this department, who reports to the rector, and effectively assumes the research management role within DEU. Part of this brief is to develop capacity across DEU to earn research income from national and international sources, and to ensure that research becomes fully accepted, both in policy and in practice, as an integral part of staff performance. However, the director is also a member of DEU teaching staff and employed as a full-time teacher, so is not in a position to devote his time fully to this new role.



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The team was informed how since 2013 the Department of Scientific Research and European Projects has endeavoured to familiarise DEU staff with national research opportunities and requirements, and to encourage colleagues from both faculties to become involved. Building on DEU's ability to remain adaptable and flexible, the department has tried to facilitate this involvement, and has been instrumental in securing invitations for DEU staff members to a number of international events and workshops, both within Europe and further afield. Given that DEU provides financial support for each staff member to participate in two conferences per year, including abroad, the team expects that this combination of factors should lead to significant increases in DEU staff participation in such events. The team was informed that a number of invitations to publish in impact journals had also been received. The team recommends that a targeted, strategic approach be taken to these activities, to make best use of possible opportunities to develop suitable research networks and for DEU to become a partner in relevant research projects. In developing this strategic approach, the views and suggestions of DEU's relevant stakeholders should also be sought, to ensure that the development of DEU's research capacities will also be of relevance to DEU's regional partners; in this way additional potential opportunities may also arise.

As part of its work and to increase the visibility of DEU research, the team also heard how the department has contacted various international research databases to include DEU journals in their listings, and that some initial favourable responses have already been received from Germany and the Netherlands. The department's focus on research performance also covers student research at DEU; information regarding this is likewise included in the department's annual report, and should be used to increase student exposure to research, which is currently very limited.

All these developments give rise to some optimism that DEU will be able, within a number of years, to develop a small number of research priority areas, and therefore also to adopt a more coherent plan for developing human resources and research capacity, in order to build critical mass. This should be seen as part of an overall developmental strategy covering staff planning and staff development, more focused income generation and investment, and the alignment with study programmes, especially Masters programmes. Such an approach would also allow DEU to communicate more clearly — both internally and externally — regarding what it is trying to do in the research area, and in its relations with regional stakeholders. These developments would also have an important knock-on effect in the strengthening of international capacities at DEU.

As discussed in the section of this report regarding governance and institutional decision making, the internal structures of DEU mean that all fulltime academic staff in each faculty are also members of the respective research centres of that faculty. This means that the same people meet regularly in their roles as members of research centres, of academic departments and of faculties. Given the small number of DEU staff and the fact that many of



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these staff also maintain external professional responsibilities, this represents a particular challenge. DEU needs to examine carefully whether, within the Romanian legislative and accreditation contexts, there are any alternatives to these structures, which would liberate more staff time for involvement in the actual development and delivery of research projects and activities.



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5. Service to society

Service to society is explicitly included in DEU's mission through the concepts of training specialists for professional life as proactive citizens in a democratic society, preserving and expanding a body of complex and advanced knowledge, and preparing students for sustainable employment. These concepts were covered in the team's discussions with the many internal and external groups, which took place during the two visits to DEU. The reality of these aspects of DEU's mission was highlighted to the team during these discussions, particularly by external stakeholders, and the positive economic, social and cultural impact of DEU was repeatedly mentioned. DEU's role as a driving force for Lugoj and the wider region should be seen as one of the main strengths of the university, on which it can build with confidence.

Given that DEU is situated within a 60km distance from two other university centres in western Romania, its smaller programme offering and smaller student numbers need to be compensated by the quality of its teaching and the success of its graduates. Therefore, these quality criteria become more important than usual and the team was informed that DEU is trying to develop a more systematic database of its alumni, including more complete information about its graduates' various employment destinations. This will be useful in continuing to monitor the social and economic impact of DEU in Lugoj and the surrounding region. For example, the team was informed that DEU was among the seven universities in Romania in 2013 whose graduates were able to enter various legal professional bodies, such as judges and prosecutors.

The team learned how many of DEU's students come from geographical areas or socio-economic or cultural groups which traditionally are not well represented in higher education. In line with the overall low dropout rates at DEU, these students successfully participate in and complete their studies, and are successful in entering or progressing in the labour market afterwards. DEU's strong involvement in raising the educational aspirations for Lugoj and the surrounding region was noted by many internal and external participants during the team's meetings, and it was clear from the meetings with students that for many, DEU was their university of choice for a variety of reasons: geographical proximity, accessibility, student friendly reputation, ability of graduates to find suitable employment, cost, ability to combine studies with work, among other reasons.

In this context, the removal of all DEU student scholarships for deserving students – because of the financial situation facing the university – appears somewhat contradictory. These scholarships had traditionally been provided each year, and were designed to address the needs of meritorious students from low-income backgrounds. As such they were a symbol of DEU's commitment to widening participation to higher education in its region, and to raising the overall educational aspirations of the population. While the need to ensure a balanced DEU budget is well appreciated by the team, it was felt that the university could also have



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sought to finance such scholarships and other student incentives through a more active mobilisation of its stakeholder network, including its alumni. In the context of developing a more comprehensive DEU alumni database, the team encourages the university to use this systematically to promote the full range of DEU's services to society, including its role in providing higher education opportunities to those who would not normally be in a position to benefit from these.

While students and employers were keen to mention the positive contributions of DEU to its region, the limited range of educational and professional training currently provided was felt to be an area where DEU had scope to improve. In a region currently characterised by high levels of employment, but where the economy is changing and the needs of the population are also changing, DEU needs to anticipate future requirements by considering a broader range of study programmes. The team was informed that this process had begun, but neither students nor external partners appeared to be aware of these early developments.

A consultation process with stakeholders regarding future medium- to long-term options might be a good way to take this forward, not just in terms of study programmes but also in terms of a broader range of mutual services and support. Given DEU's reliance on student fees and on other forms of income from private sources, it would also be in the university's interests to have a more structured partnership model in place, which would be mutually beneficial to both the university and a range of partners. This could also address the rather limited levels of knowledge transfer, which are currently in evidence from DEU to both the private and public sectors.



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6. Quality culture

As already noted in this report, the team was frequently reminded during its visits to Lugoj that the ongoing success and reputation of DEU depends on the quality of the teaching, learning, research and other related services it provides to a broad range of learners, partners and stakeholders in Lugoj and the surrounding region. As a private university which depends on the income it generates from its own activities, the quality of these and the quality culture across the university needed to maintain these are paramount, particularly so when student numbers are under pressure. The team therefore explored this central theme as part of its discussions across all the other thematic areas, and with all the main groups of actors, both internal and external. These discussions were built around the four key questions of the IEP methodology, as mentioned previously:

- 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?

In terms of “what is DEU trying to do?”, the team observed that DEU takes a pragmatic approach to quality assurance and quality culture, infusing together a blend of different concepts – including compliance with regulatory requirements, student and labour market demand/satisfaction, benchmarking, and fitness for purpose. While DEU’s mission is well articulated and known, both within the university and externally among its partners, DEU is less explicit about the various quality assurance activities, which support this mission. In the context of the university currently considering a possible expansion or realignment of this mission, it might also be opportune to consider how DEU’s quality assurance activities can be explicitly aligned to support this during the next phase of DEU’s development.

The team also heard many comments regarding the quality of high school education in Romania today, and the challenge this now represents to DEU in working with new incoming students. Given DEU’s particular mission and student profile, DEU may also wish to consider how it can address this challenge in an effective way which also supports the implementation of DEU’s mission and strategic development.

In examining the question of “how is DEU trying to do it?”, the team was in a position to confirm that DEU has a number of internal quality assurance mechanisms in place. These include the use of standardised student questionnaires for the evaluation of each subject taught and the corresponding professor. These questionnaires also cover the broader syllabus, and are administered by the heads of department and the Faculty Councils, where the information is also collected and analysed. Two student representatives are involved in the analysis of questionnaires for each subject/professor. Annual reports based on the results of



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these questionnaires are made by each faculty, and brought together by the DEU Quality Assurance and Assessment Board. This Board reports to the DEU Senate for approval.

In addition to these evaluations using feedback from students, DEU staff members are also evaluated, in a three-tier process, initially through a self-evaluation methodology, then by their DEU colleagues, and the DEU management. The team was informed how these evaluations – both by staff and students – can and have been used by DEU management to inform difficult decisions which are taken, for example a decision not to continue an employment contract.

A number of quality assurance measures are also used at DEU to ensure that the curricula are as suitable as possible to the needs of learners and potential employers. These include compliance with the relevant ARACIS standards in that field, although it was agreed that while this was a necessary requirement, it was in itself not enough to respond to the broader questions of quality assurance, quality enhancement and quality culture. In particular, ARACIS standards are very explicit regarding the requirements for the first year of studies, and for the second semester of the third year of studies, leaving very little room for optional subjects. The team encourages DEU to create, where possible, greater opportunities for students to make choices within their curriculum regarding those elements of most interest or relevance to each student's own objectives, particularly at Master's level.

The team was also informed of benchmarking activities undertaken by DEU, where it compares itself – informally and implicitly – with other universities in Romania, which it sees as academic standard setters in the areas where DEU is also active. DEU also consults with and listens to the business sector; meetings are organised two to three times per year, and DEU can respond quickly. An example was provided in the field of human resource management, which was expressed as a need by a number of companies in Lugoj.

All DEU graduates also complete a questionnaire, one year after graduation, which captures what graduates have done since leaving the university. This method has been in place since 2001/2002, and is managed by the DEU general secretary. The team was informed however that, since Lugoj is a small town, news regarding appointments, promotions or the creation of new businesses spread rapidly, so the public and also the university have a large amount of informal knowledge regarding the success of DEU graduates.

The Quality Assurance and Assessment Board also undertakes internal analysis on particular topics of interest to DEU, for example the use of the web by teaching staff, to help inform strategic developments which need to be considered by the DEU rector and deans. The Department of Research and European projects can also assist with such analysis and projects, as required.



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The team was therefore able to point to DEU's strengths in the field of quality assurance and quality culture, with good levels of awareness across the university about quality assurance and its importance, with formal internal procedures in place and which function, and with inclusive efforts to involve students and staff in these QA activities and culture.

On the basis of its discussions, the team was also able to identify a number of potential weaknesses in DEU's work in this area. These weak points are connected with the remaining IEP questions, i.e. "How does DEU know that it works?", and "How does DEU change in order to improve?". While DEU has a variety of processes and procedures to monitor the quality of its various activities, it was not clear to the team how the final outputs of these processes and procedures were used. For example, it was not clear to the team how the QA reports from the faculty councils, the Quality Assurance and Assessment Board, and the Senate are considered or what actions arise as a result. There is likewise a healthy assumption that increased research activity at DEU will have a positive impact on teaching and learning, but the links between the existing QA mechanisms for teaching and learning, and any planned future QA mechanisms for research, were not explained. The team considers that it would be useful for DEU to be more explicit regarding how the various QA activities feed into broader strategic discussions and planning at the university, and for these to become more explicitly linked with the broader university strategic developments now under consideration. A more explicit approach to this would also be of use in communicating better, both internally and externally, the outcomes of DEU's quality assurance processes.

With the creation of the Quality Assurance and Assessment Board, DEU now has the opportunity to focus on the question "How does the institution change in order to improve?". The team noted that the follow-up to reports and recommendations is unclear, both in terms of who leads these processes, how they should happen and who monitors them. Likewise, creating a strong link between curriculum reform and academic staff performance, including research performance, and bringing together the information and results from the various QA mechanisms, would assist in answering this question.



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7. Internationalisation

While the international ambition of DEU is enshrined in its name, this European and cross-border dimension is not mentioned in the university's mission. The team was informed that in its early years the university had benefited from the rich network of international links and contacts which had been developed by its founder, Prof. Drăgan, but that since his death these had slowly been lost and few new contacts created.

While DEU's ambitions to have international student exchanges and research projects are evident from the university's documentation, the evidence of such activities in reality is rather thin. In discussing this topic with the team, the university openly acknowledged that current levels of internationalisation were very low, and was realistic about the challenges it now faces in achieving its ambitions in this area.

The team learned that three students from the Republic of Moldova were currently studying at DEU, and that DEU was keen to attract more. Based on a twinning arrangement between the municipality of Lugoj and a municipality in Moldova, an initial visit had taken place several years ago and a number of students had come to DEU on scholarships. However, since that time it appeared that no follow-up had taken place on the initial scholarship investments.

DEU also attracts small numbers of students from abroad who are of Romanian ancestry or from the Romanian diaspora, from countries such as Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The team met some of these students as part of its meetings with students from each faculty. The students whom the team met suggested that DEU need to advertise itself better in order to attract greater numbers of such students. Apart from these two categories of students, DEU does not appear to attract any students from abroad, on either a full-time or an exchange basis. The team was informed that other international students (who do not already speak Romanian) need to spend a foundation year learning Romanian at a higher education institution, which is officially accredited to provide this year, and that these are all large public higher education institution.

No DEU students appear to have participated in a student exchange programme or summer school, except those who had already attended other Romanian universities, or visited a university abroad. However, a small number of DEU students have gone abroad to study after completing their degree at DEU. There are also a number of students at DEU who have previously studied at another Romanian university. These students have now actively chosen DEU for a variety of reasons, and those met by the team all compared their experiences at DEU favourably with their previous places of study.

Given DEU's specific profile, it also needs to be strategic in identifying potential partner universities abroad, for the purposes of student exchange but also for staff exchanges, research projects and other activities. In the team's opinion, DEU will have greater success in



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establishing mutually beneficial relations with universities of a broadly similar profile, in terms of mission, student body, academic programmes and research interests. Such universities may be less well-known internationally but may prove to be a more suitable match for DEU for a variety of reasons. DEU needs to identify an initial target group of such possible partners and consider how best to approach them. In the meanwhile, DEU also needs to consider how best to promote itself on the international stage, particularly so that it can also be found by such partners. The team suggested that DEU should explore recent international visibility options, such as U-Multirank, to raise its own profile. DEU urgently needs to expand the sections of its website currently available in any language other than Romanian.

The team was informed that DEU's application to participate in the Erasmus+ programme had recently been refused. The unfortunate implication of this means that DEU will now encounter major difficulties in participating in EU-funded exchange programmes or academic projects. This means that DEU will need to focus on niche areas, through possible partners of a similar profile as suggested above, and by expanding the categories of Romanian-speaking students from other countries who already appreciate DEU and can act as ambassadors. In developing this approach, DEU should build on its own existing strengths, including its low dropout rates, student-centred environment and its reputation for ensuring that DEU graduates successfully obtain suitable employment, in order to develop its "brand" and market itself more effectively. Innovative use of its alumni and stakeholder network could help in this regard, and also in promoting other forms of internationalisation in addition to student mobility.

There is also scope to build on opportunities in the field of DEU staff mobility. The desire to strengthen research capacity and the existence of incentives to attend conferences represent opportunities and, again, DEU needs to be innovative in how to increase the existing very low levels of incoming and outgoing staff. The steps recently taken by the Department of Scientific Research and European Projects, as well as the lessons learned from DEU's first application for a Tempus project, will need to be followed up assiduously to ensure that such opportunities are used strategically, and that these efforts are aligned with other strategic developments aimed at enhancing internationalisation at DEU.

It was clear during the team's visits that considerable language barriers continue to exist at DEU, with both students and staff. The existence of language courses for all DEU students to improve their foreign language competences is an important initiative, and DEU staff may also need to be incentivised to do likewise. Such language competences are obviously essential for students to enhance their own skills and their employment opportunities, but also for staff who seek to develop and expand their research opportunities.

In bringing these various strands together, the team considers that DEU currently has an opportunity to reconsider the topic of internationalisation in a fresh way, and to ensure that



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internationalisation becomes a central element in supporting and implementing DEU's refreshed mission for the next ten years. This would involve defining a strategy and priorities; seeking strategic investment through its existing networks of stakeholders, alumni and from its founders; and investing in the people (new and existing) at DEU who can make this happen.



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8. Conclusion

The team would like to thank all those staff and students at DEU and its external partners and stakeholders who met with the team during its visits, and who helped the team understand the current context, challenges and opportunities DEU is currently facing. It is clear from these discussions that DEU has identified these challenges and opportunities to a large extent already, and is taking steps to address these as part of its mission to provide high quality education and other services in Lugoj and the surrounding region.

The team found that the internal DEU culture of open dialogue and respect has been an important asset in the university's development over the last twenty years, and the current leadership is to be congratulated in carrying this forward in today's more challenging environment. This established culture of dialogue and respect now needs to be combined with a new culture of strategic planning and implementation and to become more results-oriented, as DEU adapts its mission to face the challenges of the next ten years.

It was clear to the team that from all perspectives DEU is a central component in the modernisation and revitalisation of Lugoj and its surrounding region. DEU should therefore not be shy in approaching its partners with well-developed proposals and suggestions, and in developing new alliances. In this way, it will be able to invest in the new skills and opportunities necessary to ensure the future, both for itself but also for the broader community.

The following is a brief summary of the main recommendations and suggestions made by the team, for consideration by the university.

Governance

- Refresh DEU's mission so that the university can continue to contribute to serve Lugoj and the surrounding region as effectively as possible for the next 10 years;
- Innovate and simplify structures and procedures where possible, in order to make most effective use of time and resources;
- Invest in new skills to support the key functions, which the university will need for the coming years.

Teaching and learning

- Refresh both the content and methods of DEU's study programmes;
- Increase the focus on what students can do when they have completed the programme (learning outcomes);



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- Consider whether economics and law continue to be enough to meet local and regional needs, in the context of DEU's refreshed mission.

Research

- All teaching staff should use up-to-date research to ensure the quality of their teaching;
- Train staff in each faculty to compete for European and international research projects;
- Continue to develop a strong strategic approach to research, bringing together staff performance, interdisciplinarity and an international dimension.

Service to society

- Develop a partnership model with stakeholders to provide mutual services and support;
- Use DEU alumni more systematically to promote university's services to society.

Quality culture

- Assign persons responsible to ensure that QA recommendations are implemented;
- Use DEU's quality processes to make sure the university improves, not just stays the same;
- Communicate the outcomes of the quality processes, as part of raising DEU's profile with key partners at home and abroad.

Internationalisation

- Define an internationalisation strategy and priorities;
- Seek investment to equip an international office with trained professionals;
- Seek universities with similar profiles for partnerships and projects;
- Seek investment for student and staff mobility;
- Provide incentives for developing the language competence of DEU staff and students.