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

UNIVERSITY OF PITEȘTI

EVALUATION REPORT

January 2014

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the University of Pitești (UPit). The evaluation took place in 2013 in the framework of the project “Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities”, which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

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

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

1.1. The Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

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

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

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



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 the University of Pitești

The University of Pitești is situated in the county capital city of Argeș County in the South Muntenia region of Romania, reportedly the wealthiest and one of the most industrialised counties in the country. This relative prosperity is based on the presence there of the Dacia automobile industry, a key partner for the university, along with nuclear, refining and other important industrial activities. None the less, there are serious problems. The region is not protected from the global financial recession and crisis (GFC) which has badly affected Romania; or from financial difficulties, especially post-GFC, which affects the region. Much of Romania is suffering demographic decline and an ageing population. This region enjoys a younger population, a higher birth-rate and, it was suggested to the evaluation team, even slight population growth in the immediate district. Poverty, especially outside the Pitești urban area, argues for local higher education provision to poor families and towns, giving some competitive advantage against the pull of more prestigious institutions further afield. The decrease in budgets and student numbers post-GFC makes the situation very tight.

UPit, like the whole national system of higher education, is working within a fast-changing and constraining legal and political environment. The system enjoys a measure of autonomy but within tight controls, approval and accountabilities, and a recently introduced national classification system. The university itself is just 50 years old, having started in 1962. It has strong anchorage and connections in the local region, through the preparation of teachers and in many other ways. At the time of the evaluation it had eleven faculties, many very small partly as a result of the recent sharp fall in student numbers.

This review takes place at a difficult, challenging and interesting time for the university. The higher education legislative environment is experienced as restrictive, causing delay and limiting the capacity to be able to act in the more creative and entrepreneurial ways felt essential to respond purposefully and flexibly to new and difficult circumstances. In particular, UPit received a critical report from ARACIS in 2009.

In the subsequent national classification exercise the university was classified as a teaching and learning institution rather than one that balanced teaching and research. The effect of



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this classification on status was estimated within UPit to have cost the university 30% of its income. It was felt to be deeply damaging to market position as well as to morale. This is reflected in steeply falling student numbers in recent years that are only now flattening out and beginning to show real prospect of recovery. The university considered the 2009 ARACIS report to lack an adequate database. Its criticisms still need to be squarely addressed and either refuted or acted on. As central financial support contracts, forcing institutions to rely more on their own “earned” income, the regional, national and global higher education market-place becomes more competitive, with more universities adopting more modern management practices.

UPit is considered to be a traditional university anchored in the region, establishing stable relationships with stakeholders, industry and business. A distinctive feature of its engagement with the region, and its effort to serve the region in times of hardship, is its multiple campuses. At some financial cost to UPit, these bring educational opportunity to local communities for which the costs of travel and especially staying away from home are prohibitive.

The university is led by an energetic, reformist and integrating rector, Ionel Didea, who has been in post since 2012. The new law has brought new governance to UPit. The recent election of a rector of strong purpose and vision brought in a leader from outside the higher education system who is determined to make full use of autonomy to modernise and move forward the institution as far as national regulations and financial constraints allow. This new rector combines a strong approach to management with a clear and well communicated view of where the university should be going.

The strengths of the university in 2013 include this leadership by the rector and his new management team. This has led to the development of an active, united and committed university, something the team encountered frequently and in many quarters, notably in the positive attitude and active participation of students as well as staff. UPit enjoys sound finances rather than being burdened by debt; and it has succeeded in beginning to reverse a decline in student numbers. Also, and equally evident, it enjoys strong community and business support.

A central challenge has been to carry through plans in an institution where morale seemed to be low, especially after the 2009 ARACIS institutional accreditation process. The rector’s election was contested, but he made his platform clear. Falling student numbers meant that faculty staff numbers had also fallen significantly. The ambition is to make UPit a dynamic organisation with strong participative leadership with fewer, but at the same time dynamic, innovating and effective faculties; to develop research and to enhance the quality of



education open to the city of Pitești, the South Muntenia including the Argeș region, and some neighbouring counties. This represents a huge challenge for the leadership in the face of the global and Romanian financial and economic crisis, and the new competitive higher education environment at national, European and international levels.

The new rector inherited a complex and fragmented structure. Practical questions about resources, budgets, buildings and regulations compete for attention with academic leadership and matters of identity, culture and morale. The rector has built a good managerial team. He delegates extensively, manages transparently with continuous consultation, and is systematically addressing inherited operational and structural problems.

A department-based student Consultative Council was created; its president serves as assistant to the rector. Institution-wide social events are arranged as part of community engagement and morale-building. Efforts are being made to bring staff together across departments, and to win over doubters. The team gained the impression that both academic and non-academic staff sense an atmosphere of departure from the past, and feel involved in this. This applies also to the students whom the team met. The enormous budget cuts probably however mean that the rather hopeful atmosphere of cultural as well as structural change will only last if real gains are experienced, and commitment can thus be sustained.

The university's strong regional links include its several branch campuses designed to strengthen community ties and where possible to take teaching to local regions. Some local mayors have taken the initiative and made facilities available. Financial constraint and reduced numbers inhibit efforts to conduct "access" work that helps the poorest and the less academically qualified to study, something to which the leadership expresses clear commitment. The university has strong ties with local industry, notably Dacia and its supplier industry, and with the school system deriving from its origins as a teacher training institute.

There is a natural but avoidable tension between the regional engagement and service mission (to which the institution and its leadership are committed), and the aspiration to raise UPit's academic profile through prestigious international links and academic publications. Combining these is at the heart of the challenge: it means creating the infrastructure and culture of the entrepreneurial university judged essential for survival, and so performing as to win reclassification in the national higher education system. Ideally the outcome will be a highly regarded regional university strongly engaged with the social and economic needs and aspirations of its region and valued for the employability of its graduates, the high quality of its teaching at all levels, and the prominence of research in clearly defined niche areas.



1.3. The evaluation process

The IEP review of the University of Pitești was undertaken by a team of five (hereinafter called the team) led by Philippe Rousseau and appointed at the beginning of 2013. The visits of the evaluation team to UPit took place in May and October 2013 respectively. In between the visits the university provided the evaluation team with additional documentation. All the team's findings and recommendations are based on written or oral information received from UPit.

The main initial briefing came from the university's self-evaluation process and the report received by the IEP team a month before their first visit. The self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in April. Led by Vice-Rector Abrudeanu, the self-evaluation group of ten was appointed by the rector in February 2013. It comprised senior academic managers together with two academic staff and two student representatives. It evidenced the open and constructive approach and culture of the UPit community set and led by the rector. There was wide consultation and efforts were made to achieve full transparency.

The self-evaluation report was well constructed, informative, and validated by full documentation. Abundant additional documentation was provided to the team for the first visit, and greatly amplified by material provided on request after the initial visit. The university took the self-evaluation seriously, along with external IEP evaluation for which it was well-prepared, as the basis for a programme of institutional improvement. This self-evaluation process was reportedly the first time that any such consultative venture had been undertaken at UPit. Just doing it evidently made a significant impact.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Philippe Rousseau, Team Chair, former President of the Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille III, France
- Johan Cloet, Former Managing Director Lessius University College/Vice- General Director Thomas More University College, Belgium
- Rainer Leisten, former Vice-Rector for Teaching and Student Affairs - University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany
- Simona Dimovska, Student, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University – Macedonia
- Chris Duke, Team Coordinator, former President UWS Nepean – Sydney, Australia

The team thanks the Rector, Professor Ionel Didea, the Vice-Rector and liaison person for UPit, Professor Mărioara Abrudneanu, and the entire university community, for their cordial



reception and candid discussions throughout the evaluation process. The many staff, students and external partners whom the team met were open and generous in providing information, explaining their experience and voicing their opinions. In particular the team valued the openness and directness of the rector in talking about his own background, purposes, hopes and plans; and Vice-Rector and former Director of International Relations Mărioara Abrudeanu's preparation and support prior to, between and during the visits.



2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 Vision, mission, strategy

A central question for the team is what the institution is really trying to be and do in terms of priorities. How clear is it about how to carry out, monitor and quality-assure its work? During the first visit the context and ambitions became clearer, but the team needed to know how widely the idea of governance is understood beyond a technical management sense, and beyond the purposeful top level. How clear are the UPit vision, mission and strategy?

The university defines its vision in the SER (page 7) as “to become a modern, dynamic institution of education and research, based on performance, competitiveness and quality, active and integrated into the local community, both regionally and nationally, and also into the European space of higher education”.

Those ambitions are praiseworthy, as are the eight values and ten general goals listed a little further in the SER, and the relevant interest in working in and with the region. The team felt however that the definition of what the university should be (its profile) was too vague, perhaps driven too much by preoccupation with the recent classification of UPit, and leading to a short-term focus.

The team recommends that UPit clarify and sharpen its vision for the longer term.

The SER “assumes an education and research mission, by accomplishing the threefold task of a modern university: education – research – community service”. These are spelt out as undergraduate, postgraduate, and post-experience [professional updating] lifelong learning; as fundamental and applied research with emphasis on take-up and relevance; and as partnership in problem-solving. These are very general principles. The statement does not give a clear picture of the specific mission, and profile, of UPit.

The team recommends that the statement of mission be more focused, and make explicit the profile of the university to all its stakeholders.

The university has elaborated a strategic plan based on the rector’s managerial contract and discussed at all levels in the institution, and has adopted comprehensive action plans. The leadership is thus strategically oriented. Moreover, these plans are owned by the entire UPit community. The strategy is, however, in the view of the team, not driven explicitly enough by clear mission and long-term objectives. It lacks clear priorities and is in its present form essentially an action plan.

The team therefore recommends that strategy be explicitly driven by a long-term vision and mission, identifying clearer priorities.



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The team heard that the rector and his team see a unique mix of education, research and regional linkage as the heart of the UPit mission, and a basis for achieving the more entrepreneurial character deemed essential for success. This implies deep cultural change sustained over time. The leadership is clear how this plays out in terms of enhancing facilities and nurturing local partnership and support. More widely there appears to be shared commitment to making education relevant to community, economic and wider needs; the employment of graduates is a key institutional indicator. UPit seeks to become internationally as well as nationally well-regarded, strong in research as well as teaching, and strongly anchored in engagement and service with and to the region's industry and communities.

Regional involvement is one of the most specific and distinctive aspects of UPit's profile and development. This is evident in terms of organisational openness, structured educational and research collaboration with external partners, especially in the automotive industry, top-level sports training and research, teacher training and the organisation of cultural events. Some difficulties in executing intentions arising from strict Ministry of Education (MoE) rules were reported to be partly overcome by negotiations. This allowed some staff promotions, merited on performance, and some new appointments where multiple vacancies had occurred, within standard national limits and criteria.

2.2 Governance

In terms of institutional governance and decision-making there are many good points. There is strong open leadership, with the will to make changes. There is an excellent emphasis on collegial and democratic decision-making. An open communication structure uses multiple channels. Feedback is encouraged. The president of the department-based student consultative council serves as assistant to the rector.

The rector is very visible, evidently accessible, and practices "management by walking around" as well as through formal structures. The participatory top-down and bottom-up style provides a basis for building entrepreneurialism. Pressed as to whether UPit was a small democracy or a medium-sized company, the rector asserts that it is both; the latter was also essential to achieve the entrepreneurial culture essential to survive. The recent and ongoing change of mood and culture of the university is palpable.

Two aspects of governance are of central and almost universal importance: Senate-Administration (academic-administrative) relations and stresses; and relations between the centre and the faculties. Is it a unitary institution led and pulling in one direction, or a loose confederation of fiefdoms?



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According to two these aspects, a key question is just how decision-making functions at the university level. Despite the risks inherent in the nationally determined “division of powers” approach between Legislature (Senate) and Executive (Administration), things at Pitești work well. The management Board of Administration is large: the rector, four vice-rectors, a CSUD manager, a chief administrative manager, two managers of institutes, 11 deans and a student representative. Combining strong and participative leadership in this structure is certainly linked to the managerial style of the rector and the vice-rectors. The administration is closely related to the Senate which takes the final decisions in the university.

There appears to be no difficulty about the potentially vexed question of divided authority between Senate and Administration. The rector is confident that by a combination of formal and informal processes governance flows easily into management activity, institutional consensus is assured, and timely and efficient action follows. Senate agendas are agreed in advance; several main issues are identified for a meeting of some three hours. The consultative process is echoed and replicated to some extent at faculty level. Students are defined as partners rather than clients. They are represented on the Senate from all faculties, at a ratio of one student to three staff.

Each Faculty Council is charged with important decision-making power and has a number of advisory or decision-making bodies. There is delegation of responsibilities and accountability at the faculty level. The budget is distributed 40% to central level and 60% to the eleven faculties, institutes and services. Faculty autonomy in spending is however strictly constrained within university rules and strategy, important in a context where only 45% of revenues are state-funded.

The arrangements for consultation and decision-making between centre and faculties are quite “dense” and time-consuming; but they ensure communication upwards as well as downwards between faculties, including students, staff and faculty management, and central administration. This is evidently effective and much valued, as was evidenced by team visits to several faculties in which these three components were met separately.

How well does the central university interact with the faculty level? There are problems to do with the inherited complexity and fragmentation of the institution. The new rector set out to address these purposefully and with patient persuasion. The team found little or no evidence of defensiveness and resistance to change. Such resistance can be highly problematic when a change to faculty arrangements is proposed. The idea has been under discussion at UPit for some months and as a result the broad merits to UPit as a whole seem to have been widely accepted. A committee was created and charged with coordinating internal discussion and making propositions to the Administrative Board and the Senate about the new structure of UPit, with a date set to complete implementation of the reform.



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The key strategic and structural change planned will amalgamate faculties, with closures or mergers, from the present eleven to as few as four or six. The intention is to regroup by reducing duplication and on the basis of demonstrated performance. This should enhance efficiency, and reflect changing internal and external reality. Student numbers have fallen in some areas with a changing labour market and different student uptake, resulting in a decrease in staff numbers also.

The change is also intended to carry through the strategy to be more flexible, relevant, responsive to community needs and entrepreneurial, bringing together different disciplines in new kinds of curriculum collaboration. At the time of our second visit the precise shape of the new configuration remained to be settled.

The team recommends that UPit adheres to the planned timetable for restructuring, so that the new structure will be fully in place for the new 2014-2015 academic year.



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3. Teaching and Learning

Changing demography, the financial crisis, the classification of the university, as well as shifts in demand for different courses and subjects, have led to a steep fall in student numbers some years ago. This presented problems for a university whose central mission is high quality education relevant to the regional labour market. The environment has become more competitive, although the university leadership seems not to fear competition, seeking to win on the basis of high quality educational experience and good outcomes. Quality is seen as a main reform driver ahead of efficiency and cost-saving.

UPit has keenly committed teachers, well appreciated by students. Students as well as staff conveyed positive purpose and energy. Students are considered valuable interlocutors by UPit. The team found that student representatives understand and are involved in university management issues. They articulate their opinions well. The wide involvement and clear common commitment of many students during the team visits show the trust held by UPit in the loyalty of their students; and students' regard and even affection for the university.

The university intends to provide student-centred education. A definition of student-centred education was not however made explicit in terms of the whole educational process. Is it output or discipline-based? What is the role of teaching? Who is the learner? What about peer learning, authentic learning situations, and learning material, the blend of learning, evaluations and examinations?

It is recommended that UPit clarify the meaning and strengthen the practice of student-centred learning.

Along with student-centred learning UPit intends to provide good study programmes that are relevant for the region and where appropriate lead to employment locally and regionally. Efforts are being made to modernise curricula and to concentrate on areas of strength and labour market demand, with strong niches in the automobile industry engineering and production, and related to the nearby nuclear industry, as well as in teacher education and related fields. There is a clear intention favouring cross-disciplinary work as well as more student-centred teaching; the team was given some good examples especially of work placements and partnerships.

The university provides a training programme for all its teaching staff and places high value on staff teaching performance. Performance appraisal is not exclusively dominated by published research output. A teacher evaluation questionnaire plays an important role in the evaluation of teaching staff, but it is quite general, unspecific and not based on an instructional vision and model. The relation between the model of student-centred learning and the questionnaire must be clear. Only in that way can it be an effective instrument of



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feedback and guidance. This questionnaire is considered an important aspect of quality management in education.

Another strength of the curriculum reflecting institutional mission is the emphasis on foreign languages, and the increasing adoption of French and English as languages of instruction. Most elements of the Bologna Process are now in place, although the application across faculties appears uneven.

It is recommended that UPit makes certain that the Bologna Process is applied throughout the institution and the degree of application tracked and continuously improved all over the institution and its units.

A strategic option favouring research and the development of interdisciplinarity is stated as one key aspect of future research at UPit. There is keen interest in getting students involved in research, or at least knowing some research methodology. Interdisciplinarity, like the relationship between research and education, is being worked on but is not yet apparent everywhere. The structure of the present faculties is discipline-based and their large number does not help interdisciplinarity. This appears to be a main reason for the planned restructuring of faculties.

It is recommended that UPit ensures that faculty restructuring does increase interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

UPit is clearly committed to equity via access and second chance courses, to get the children of families with non-academic backgrounds, possibly in an unfavourable financial situation, to university and retain them to complete first level and then study beyond. This includes building good links with the schools, e.g. via pupil teacher programmes, free courses on Saturdays, summer and winter schools, and rural camps, as well as UPit's several local campuses. There is no capacity to offer student loans. A part of the mission in favour of wider equity and regional education is sustaining the commitment, despite logistical difficulties and costs, to providing degree study in the local regional centres.

Beyond the formal academic curriculum, UPit seeks to enhance the student experience by means of improved facilities and relationships on campus; and to prepare students to gain employment by writing CVs, and by getting internships, job placements, and part-time work experience. These things are seen to tip the balance in getting a job, a main UPit indicator of success. There is a difficult balance to be struck between sustaining the academic foundations of degree study and securing good employment and ongoing vocational prospects for alumni.

Infrastructure and resources appear generally satisfactory, and there is commitment to their improvement as much as resources allow. There is a strong emphasis on relevance to the



local labour market, and on internships and work experience. Job take-up by graduates is a key performance indicator and performance well recognised as such in the different areas.

It is recommended that UPit makes employers one of the key partners in a process of continuous curriculum development and review.



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4. Research

UPit is keen to be an institution that does good research and provides research-linked education. It is making sustained efforts to develop its research capability and activity. These include creating a new research structure, still at an early stage of development, and developing and using a database of scientific activity, now well advanced. The team was provided with comprehensive documentation of the university's research performance and published outcomes.

UPit suffered seriously in status and income when it was classified as a teaching rather than a teaching and research university. A new sense of purpose has been ignited by the dynamism of the new leadership in support of recovery of this identity. It is the university's most obvious and tangible shared aspiration. Without scientific research, the team was told, UPit cannot be a real university. The steps judged necessary are now being followed. The team found a "work-in-progress" at different stages of implementation.

A university research institute and research centres are being created to concentrate effort and resources and have the effects worked through, leaving teaching-focused departments. Many of the centres are in fact continuations of previous department-based activities. A shift toward great focus, concentration and interdisciplinarity, in research as in teaching, is foreshadowed. The change finds general favour. The team was told that it is good for UPit-wide collaboration and the sharing of equipment, rather than being a loss for faculties and departments.

These are undoubtedly positive moves. They prove that UPit has the ability to critically analyse its situation and collectively make good decisions to change and improve it. But they are not enough yet for the university to reach the level of excellence it aspires to.

The new structuring of research activities under impulse from the vice-rector for research and competitiveness is still at an early stage, and the research units are still fragmented and discipline-based. The whole organisation of UPit's scientific activity is as yet insufficiently cohesive.

Above all, the definition of the nature of research at UPit lacks clarity, and there is a lack of medium and long-term research strategy based on clear identification of areas of excellence at different levels, and a clear set of priorities. This needs some explanation.

There is a clear intention to concentrate research in areas of UPit strength, especially automotive engineering and related areas of science and technology; and to further develop a "unique selling project niche" for UPit in the region, especially with this and with the nuclear industry. This could be complemented by some reorientation of management



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disciplines, such as industrial management with an automotive focus. These are areas crucial to the regional economy, where multi-strand partnerships are already in place.

Another long-established research and teaching focus is teacher education and training. Being involved in regional teacher education and in the nation-wide conceptualisation of teacher education offers many research and teaching perspectives, where UPit claims to be among the national leaders. Linking this work with teachers and UPit's engineering and management focus could for example include soft-skill training for each others' students. In several areas UPit works in close partnership with national research and development institutes which are based at least in part in its region. Strong local partnerships thus support an enhanced national and indeed international profile. This exemplifies what can be done if UPit clearly defines and drives its research strategy.

Interdisciplinary research was presented as an interesting approach for well-established research units to further enhance their productivity. The concept is easily understandable to policy makers. The team considers that interdisciplinary activities might make sense in selected combinations of disciplines where research capacity has already been established at an adequate level. For other research groups the interdisciplinary approach requires prior further profiling of research activities within the discipline, while maintaining or developing open-mindedness about interdisciplinary aspects. As yet, the team does not discern a sufficiently integrated interdisciplinary approach to a consistent research strategy.

Much of UPit research is applied research and research and development, paying attention in particular to the take-up of R&D. An incubator is at an early stage of planning and implementation. Applied research and R&D should be taken fully into account in a definition of research profile, built into a research strategy, and aligned with the vision and mission of the university.

The team recommends that UPit clearly define its research strategy and identifies its strengths and priorities at different levels.

The team recommends that UPit structure its scientific activity in accordance with its research strategy.

UPit is keen to build more national and international research partnerships. It is important to anchor these in its regional applied work and R&D rather than be mainly discipline-based research; and to avoid distorting desirable and usefully productive research in order to conform to conventional international criteria for measuring and rating research. International activities should be focused within the vision and mission of UPit, in line with both its resource capabilities and its mission and strategy across all areas of activity.



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Industry is a significant source of support and resources for both education and applied research.

The team commends the determination to adhere to a regional development and service identity and mission, working with regional partners and anchoring research effort in this.

UPit needs to link research with education and community service in executing internal reforms. This link needs to be woven into the structural changes, simplifying and better focusing where resources go and what is done in line with the mission. As in education, UPit should define and communicate internally and externally, in an explicit statement, as to what kind of research it wishes to develop from that perspective.

The university and the academic area may therefore wish to examine the breadth and spread of specialisations, while continuing to favour interdisciplinarity and ensuring that service to the community remain central.

Expressing this widely shared view that without “scientific research” UPit cannot be a real university, a formula target of 30 percent of academic staff time for research is popular. Teaching hours are however high. Reaching this target is undermined by teaching load and administrative duties. Even the energy absorbed in the process of feeding the database is considerable, and the effort to raise refereed and published research output is demanding. The team found evidence of much unpaid voluntary effort especially among younger staff.

The team recommends that all available means be employed to support and empower researchers.

Bearing in mind the importance of research-influenced teaching as a foundation for high quality student-centred learning, research needs to be systematically linked with teaching at all levels: Bachelor as well as Masters and PhD programmes. It is unclear how fully the plan for the centralised research institute and centres has been thought through for its impact on teaching. It would be problematic if they put at risk the quality and successful output of the education which is UPit’s lifeblood.

It is recommended that the vital link between research and teaching be kept centrally in mind as the changes are carried through.

In summary, the team praises UPit for its commitment to provide a good support base and enhance research performance by means of concentration, a new structure and a good database. However, it finds no adequately clear and confident definition of the nature of that research. More needs to be done to identify and promote areas of excellence. UPit recognises that coherent re-organisation is a “work-in-progress”.



The team recommends completing the restructure, clearly defining strategy and priorities, further empowering researchers, with an unerring focus on regional needs, opportunities and partnership, and on the links between research and teaching.



5. Service to society

Regional engagement, partnership and development are at the heart of the UPit vision, mission and strategy. The challenge is to sustain and deepen this through the processes of reforming and strengthening both teaching and research. The team found real engagement and commendable university initiatives in the service of the regional community. Reciprocally, regional partners take keen interest in and support the development of UPit. There is much interweaving of personnel (alumni, part-time university teachers and researchers).

The rector was a tenured law professor but also a practising lawyer who is taking new community partnership and service initiatives. He is aware of the importance of networking and promotional work in the community, and has strong community links. UPit is now building more widely on its partnerships and local activities in industry and the employment sector. The potential of the region for productive partnership beneficial to UPit is well recognised and embedded in the UPit mission statement. This includes other districts where there are deep-rooted links as well as the prosperous Argeş District. “Service” includes the regional recruitment and success of these local students.

The desire to engage and to benefit regional communities and business underpins UPit’s emphasis on revising curricula in line with changing needs and employability, a main UPit indicator. Much of the research agenda is guided by the experience and further prospect of partnership and co-production of applied knowledge and R&D as well as work-based and work-related learning. Some students told the team that they chose UPit not because it was cheaper – some paid more and came further than otherwise necessary – but on the basis of reputation for quality in their field and connectedness with the local economy.

UPit judges successful service to society also by take-up into employment of its graduates. It values and monitors relations with different locations and sub-regions, both in the city and at other locations where it has campuses and offers educational services. The number, strength and productivity of partnerships with private and public sector bodies is monitored across dimensions ranging from research and R&D grants and income, to student placements, international linkages and sustainability.

Lifelong learning (LLL), including for the school sector and the performance of Muntenia, are prominent in the university’s mission and work, globally and especially in the region. The team was told that UPit pioneered LLL nationally, being the first Romanian institution in the field, through European programmes in collaboration with French and English specialists. The Muntenia Institute of Training and Performance was established in 2012 by way of a 62-partner EU TEMPUS project. The university’s reach is national as well as within the Piteşti region and it has a strong record of achievements, with special consultancy competence in a



number of areas at national level. UPit is also a national resource centre for teaching the Romanian language, thus assisting national as well as UPit internationalisation.

A new business incubator was established two years ago on an off-campus site. It has five staff and is only now beginning its first start-up projects. Monitoring its performance will be important later. Cultural engagement and shared activities and use of facilities are among soft indicators of success in “service”.

It is recommended that UPit monitor the performance and outcomes of the new incubator.

The wish to build city and regional development needs to be explicated and taken further, for example using alumni links. There are strong personal links in the community; many part-time teaching staff who work in the community are also UPit alumni.

It is recommended that UPit nurture an active Alumni Association as a source of support for its service to society mission.

There is a Consultative Council (CC) to connect UPit with key stakeholders in the region. This includes representatives from the “socioeconomic environment” and EU-based partnerships, many of whom came to the university to meet the team. They are clearly committed to valuing and supporting UPit as “their university”. The team sees this Council as an important mechanism to be used and further strengthened. Well used, it offers a potent means of connecting the university to its key partners and enabling the exercise of influence in policy and curriculum development which is prohibited by law within the management of the university.

The team recommends that full use be made of this newly created Consultative Council of stakeholders, including with the faculties in the new system when they are re-formed shortly.

As well as the vigorous outreach activity of the rector and the potential contribution of the Consultative Council, already existing networking and informal association by different parties throughout the university is important for strengthening community partnership and developing the more entrepreneurial culture and capability that is recognised as essential. These more informal links in depth, centrally driven by the rector and senior management and exercised through all faculty areas, should inform the strategic focusing of the new larger faculties, and the emerging research institute and centres. Examples of important city links include sport, and philharmonic music located in the Faculty of Theology, as well as the more obvious areas of the economy, applied research and continuing professional development.

The team recommends that UPit remain region-focused, aspiring to excellence as an engaged regional service university; and that it balance responding to the current needs of the socio-



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economic environment and taking an active and proactive role in future regional development.



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6. Quality culture

The team was told that the university leadership considers quality to be important in terms of culture, assurance, management, and enhancement. It sees quality as essential in its mission and entrepreneurial aspirations. A real improvement-oriented quality culture already exists in many part of the organisation. There is no doubt about the intent: serious efforts are being made to develop an efficient system and a sound quality structure. The team's questions mainly concerned management: the means and the extent to which action follows intent.

UPit has fully implemented all the legal requirements for quality assurance and there has been considerable work on creating a coherent body of regulations and procedures. Active student involvement has already been achieved, with some tangible results.

The strong will and purposefulness of the new leadership and the change in morale over the past year suggest that remaining deficiencies in operations will be remedied. Indeed the culture and morale of UPit appear to be running ahead of full implementation of a high quality audit system. Implementing a complete, efficient and economical system is a present pressing task. There is the risk of a gap between the quality management system and a quality culture, in an opposite sense than is common: here the culture is widely shared but the system connections have not yet all been made, nor decisions fully carried through.

It is recommended that UPit maintain the quality culture at department and study programme level, and expand it to all parts of the institution.

The present inherited management system is complex and fragmented. Big differences still persist between central management and some faculties; it was admitted that there had been "an inertia in restarting the engine". Definitions of quality are missing and the quality loops seem not to close in all areas. There is great need for an explicit qualitative definition of education, research and service — only if this definition exists in conceptual terms and operational consequences will the quality and quality assurance of these core elements of the university's activities be made transparent and effectively subjected to the PDCA cycle.

It is recommended that definitions of quality be adopted in all fields.

The team believes that there is excessive reliance on ISO models and ARACIS requirements which do not really enhance the quality culture. As some older staff retire, and so long as enthusiastic often younger members can sustain their present energy and voluntary effort, the rector's current mandate should see the total change process completed successfully.

It is recommended that UPit make its quality management lean, and that it give priority to quality improvement as compared with quality documentation.



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Evaluating the quality of programmes and curricula is the responsibility of the faculties under the supervision of the UPit Quality Management Department. This is seen as a bottom-up process. Student feedback is undertaken, and generally taken seriously and acted on. Final decisions are taken by the Senate. The new stronger management structure, with vice-rectors having oversight of several faculties each from a UPit perspective, no doubt helps to drive quality. It will be further assisted if UPit data can be better integrated through planned new IT systems.

UPit should make sure that there is continuing good coordination between Senate and executive management in supporting a quality culture.

The team was initially unclear about some links in the chain, and about how the university closes and acts systematically on the quality cycle. Quality enhancement does follow assessment in terms of staff support and development, but more could be done across some areas. There is the requirement for a five-yearly ARACIS review of all programmes. Each department has at least one academic staff member responsible for quality management. The university has chosen an ISO approach in the quality management of education, in which the focus on procedures is very strong. The team is not convinced that the effort to prepare for ISO is wise and necessary. ISO 9001 pays some attention to quality enhancement, but the main emphasis is on assurance. The team questioned the choice of an ISO approach because it does not fit well in an academic context. ISO quality approach is a procedural approach better suited to industrial production or an administrative environment. A fully operational quality cycle must also take in, for example employer feedback on curriculum and student outcomes.

Student feedback is taken seriously, with individual questionnaires on both teaching and curriculum, but there is apparently no regular UPit-wide system of student feedback. This would be something natural to introduce, given the university's mission emphasis on being student-centred. Students in some of the groups which the team met would like to see continuous course evaluation. This shows the strength of active student participation, a great asset to a self-reforming institution. Some departments wait for the five-yearly cycle; other departments undertake it annually.

It would be desirable as soon as possible to review and systematise UPit's staff development quality enhancement experience, initiatives and intentions; and to ensure that an annual cycle is completed by central reporting and review. On the other hand there is much local student energy and exchange on teaching and learning via local social networking within subjects and groups, some among students only, some of both students and staff. Students assured the team that in case of problems they had direct recourse via their own student representatives.



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7. Internationalisation

The UPit leadership is keen on and fundamentally committed to internationalisation. This is seen to be central to its identity, mission and future success in both quality and entrepreneurial terms. The value and purpose appears to be widely shared among academic staff and students. The university has a well structured office for international relations and international projects, with deep experience of internationalism at senior UPit management levels.

There is significant mobility in terms of incoming students, and some incoming teachers and administrative staff, and a steady outbound flow of students and staff using Erasmus and other EU programmes. The team concluded however that there was insufficient outgoing mobility of both students and staff to support institutional mission and strategy. It is generally harder to bring staff and students from other countries to UPit, and there is no UPit-wide coordinated plan to direct international development. The university needs to clarify what the strategic goals and the objectives of internationalisation are, going beyond mobility.

It is recommended that UPit establish an internationalisation strategy that uses and builds on existing specific links and experiences.

There are joint Master programmes. Efforts are being made to internationalise further by introducing more programmes taught in French and English, and by extending teaching in these languages at undergraduate level. Two full Bachelor programmes are already taught entirely in French.

It is recommended that the use of international languages in study programmes be extended.

UPit has only one double degree with a foreign institution. It would greatly benefit its strategy of excellence as an engaged regional service university to widen its portfolio of joint degrees with European and/or other international higher education institutions.

The team recommends that UPit encourage the development of individual joint modules, through to full joint study programmes, with European and other higher education institutions internationally.

There is good experience in some parts of the university of relations with foreign universities. The best-established foreign links are with France, partly because French is required to work with the leading employer and business partner, Dacia. Many students at UPit seem keen to take up these opportunities, although the team also met students, surprisingly perhaps in economics, who are firmly and unapologetically local in their orientation and ambitions for employment. There is no contradiction, nor incompatibility, between the active development of UPit international relations and the university's regional mission.



It is recommended that UPit combine and balance regional embedding and international exposure in its work and in student experience.

The university leadership wishes to raise international aspirations with an eye to students graduating into and working in the automobile industry, nationally and in other countries. One way to achieve this could be by peer mentoring.

It is recommended that UPit develop mentoring between consecutive generations of outgoing and new students to reassure, encourage and motivate more students to study abroad.

Surprisingly, the team was told that one major obstacle to the development of outgoing mobility arises from the reluctance of teaching staff in some parts of UPit to encourage students to go abroad, make contact with pedagogical teams in partner institutions and recognise credits acquired in foreign universities. This is detrimental to internationalisation.

The team recommends that UPit look for ways to equip and encourage staff to enable students to undertake international mobility.

Partnerships are actively sought and used for research. The Institute of Training and Performance Muntenia emphasises that in 1995 it was the first Romanian university to take part in and benefit from the EU TEMPUS project. This explicitly links regional professional training and development work with European partners. Part of that work is through the LOGOS foreign Language Center in the Faculty of Letters, illustrating the university's commitment to learning and using the main European languages. UPit also claims the nation's No.1 spot for teaching Romanian as a foreign language, thus aiming to make it easier to bring both students and staff to study and work at UPit and elsewhere in the country. As a result of these arrangements UPit has good resources for teaching both foreign languages and Romanian as a foreign language.



8. Conclusion

The team found the University of Pitești to be an institution moving from internal division, low morale and a state of crisis towards being strongly led, confident and purposefully oriented, with a clear identity and ambition. There is renewed commitment to building on and strengthening partnership and service in and to the local region. The university is not in debt. It has well-founded and institution-wide ambitions to rebuild student numbers through course renewal reflecting regional labour market needs; and continuing to secure good labour market outcomes for its graduates. Above all there is widely shared commitment to raising the quality and thereby the stature of UPit, and being recognised as a fine teaching and research university.

Significant changes to structure and management processes are under way, combining a strong central team with devolution to fewer and larger faculties and fewer departments, thus concentrating research effort and allowing efficiencies and interdisciplinary teaching as well as research. There is more progress to be made. The rector is moving fast, with perhaps a four-year time-frame for changes to be carried out and bedded down, leading to a sustainable new culture and identity.

All in all, UPit is a very commendable university, well appreciated by its students, with committed staff, positively perceived and supported by its stakeholders. It has faced and it still faces tough challenges; but it has shown steely determination and the capacity to change. It has a strong, efficient and united leadership able to muster and instil confidence in an increasingly united university community. Decisive steps have been taken. Much remains to be done to reach the level of excellence that UPit has set as its own goal. It has the dynamic energy to achieve this. It is important to ensure that it continues. There is every reason to believe that UPit will achieve its objectives and enjoy the recognition that it duly deserves.

Summary of Recommendations

The team recommends that:

UPit clarify and sharpen its vision for the longer term;

the mission statement be more focused and make explicit the profile of the university to all its stakeholders;

the strategy be explicitly driven by long-term vision and mission, identifying clearer priorities;



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UPit adhere to the planned timetable for restructuring, so that the new structure will be fully in place for the new 2014-15 academic year;

UPit clarify the meaning and strengthen the practice of student-centred learning;

UPit make certain that the Bologna Process is applied throughout the institution and that the degree of application is tracked and continuously improved all over the institution and its unit;

UPit ensure that faculty restructuring increases interdisciplinary teaching and learning;

UPit make employers one of the key partners in a process of continuous curriculum development and review;

UPit clearly define its research strategy and identify its strengths and priorities at different levels;

UPit structure its scientific activity in accordance with its research strategy;

UPit remain determined to adhere to a regional development and service identity and mission, working with regional partners and anchoring research effort in this work;

all available means be employed to support and empower researcher;

the vital link between research and teaching be kept in mind as structural changes are carried through;

UPit complete its restructuring, clearly defining strategy and priorities and further empowering researchers, with an unerring focus on regional needs, opportunities and partnership, and on the link between research and teaching;

UPit monitor the performance and outcomes of the new incubator;

UPit nurture an active Alumni Association as a source of support for its service to society mission;

full use is made of the newly created Consultative Council of stakeholders;

UPit remain region-focused, aspiring to excellence as an engaged regional service university; and it balance responding to the current needs of the socio-economic environment and taking an active and proactive role in future regional development;

UPit maintain a high quality culture at department and study programme level, and extend it to all parts of the institution;

definitions of quality be adopted in all fields;



UPit make its quality management lean, giving priority to quality improvement as compared with quality documentation;

UPit make sure that there is continuing good coordination between Senate and executive management in supporting a quality culture;

UPit establish an internationalisation strategy that use and build on existing specific links and experiences;

the use of international languages in study programmes be extended;

UPit encourage the development of individual joint modules, through to full joint study programmes, with European and other higher education institutions internationally;

UPit combine and balance regional embedding with international exposure in its work, and in student experience;

UPit develop mentoring between consecutive generations of outgoing students to assist internationalisation;

UPit equip, encourage and support staff to enable students to be more internationally mobile.