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Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

“Vasile Goldiș” Western University in Arad

EVALUATION REPORT

January 2014

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Quality and Diversity
of the Romanian Universities





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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the “Vasile Goldiș” Western University in Arad (VGWU). 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). The IEP offers evaluations to support higher education 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?

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 which is aimed to support 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 VGWU to draw its own conclusions, based on its own internal assessment.

1.2 “Vasile Goldiș” Western University in Arad’s profile

VGWU is a comprehensive university offering a broad range of academic programmes at Bachelor, Master and Doctorate levels. VGWU is a not-for-profit institution, a legal entity of private law and public utility, founded, owned and ultimately governed by a number of local and regional stakeholders in the Arad region. These founders are mostly various public authorities and also the Orthodox Church. Its income is derived from student fees, research monies, other earned income and philanthropy.

According to the VGWU self-evaluation report and annexes, during the 2012-13 academic year there were approximately 12,750 students at the university, with approximately 59% of these students being female. The Faculty of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry is the largest faculty, with approximately 37% of all VGWU students, with the Faculties of Humanities, Politics and Administrative Sciences (6%) and Natural Sciences, Engineering and Computer Science (5%) being the smallest. According to the data in the self-evaluation report, approximately 66% of the VGWU graduates each year graduate with a Bachelor degree, and 33% with a Master degree, and very small numbers with a Doctorate degree.



The team was informed that – like all universities in Romania, the student numbers at VGWU were not immune to the important demographic decline in young people in Romania and – linked to changes in student demand and labour market conditions, this impact was particularly severe in the field of economics.

In terms of staff, during the 2012-13 academic year, VGWU employed 327 tenured academic staff and 226 associate academic staff, with the largest numbers of staff in both cases at lecturer and then assistant lecturer levels. The student/teacher ratio for 2012-13, as provided in the self-evaluation report, averaged 18.83 across VGWU. There were however significant differences between faculties, ranging from 12.25 to 59.7.

VGWU's distinct philosophy and ethos is to serve the higher education, training and research needs of Arad city and region, as determined by its founders. It has strong regional anchorage and support from its founders, other local stakeholders and cross-border partners, among others.

VGWU sets out to meet this philosophy in a dynamic way, and has used its private status as an advantage in this respect, from a legal, financial but also entrepreneurial way, able to act as a “quick mover” and building on its networking strengths throughout the broader Arad region. This strong engagement of VGWU with the region is evident through a number of specific projects in a range of areas, and through the ecological, forestry, entrepreneurial and medical services it provides, among others.

The IEP evaluation team (“the team”) found strong evidence of VGWU students' support for their university. Students feel included and heard in their daily interactions and learning at VGWU, and there is a strong sense of community and collegiality, and a strong culture of respect that permeates the university.

VGWU is active in teaching, research and other activities across a broad range of academic fields, with Faculties of Law; Economics; Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry; Humanities, Politics and Administrative Sciences; Educational Sciences, Psychology, Physical Education, Sports; and Natural Sciences, Engineering and Computer Science. This range of fields is unusually broad in a Romanian context, and presents challenges but also opportunities for VGWU at the present time. In addition, in the opinion of the team, VGWU also has a number of opportunities compared to public universities, e.g. in using its flexible financial and human resource mechanisms. The team found clear evidence of strong financial management and standing at VGWU which provides confidence for the future of the institution.



1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a self-evaluation group led by the vice-rector for international relations and European brand. The group also included the vice-rector for academic affairs, the vice-rector for research and relations with society, the university secretary, the university general director, the financial director, the director of quality assurance, and a student representative.

The self-evaluation report and appendices contained a large amount of useful data and information, including some analysis. It was clear to the team that a lot of effort and care had gone into compiling the report; this was the first time that such a report had been produced at VGWU.

The VGWU self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was made available for the evaluation team at the end of April 2013. The visits of the evaluation team to VGWU took place from 26 to 28 May 2013 and from 22 to 25 September 2013 respectively. In between the visits, VGWU provided the team with some additional documentation requested by the team, mostly in the teaching and learning, research and financial management areas.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Jürgen Kohler, former Rector, Greifswald University, Germany, team chair
- Ladislav Mirossay, Rector, P.J. Safarik University, Slovak Republic
- Anastasios Manthos, former Rector, Aristotle University, Greece
- Asnate Kažoka, Master's student, Riga Technical University, Latvia
- Lewis Purser, Director of Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association, Ireland, team coordinator

The team would like to thank the Rector, Prof. Dr Coralia Adina Cotoraci, and Vice-Rectors, in particular Prof. Dr Anca Hermenean, for their warm welcome and hospitality at VGWU in Arad, and for the frank and serious discussions which characterised the team visits to the university.



2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 Background

VGWU is structured according to traditional academic lines, with six faculties and a number of academic departments (ranging from two to six) within each faculty. The team learned that, as a result of changing student demographics and labour market demand, the number of faculties had been reduced from nine since 2010. This appeared to the team to be prudent governance by the VGWU board of directors, resulting in more effective structures for the smaller academic fields. Within this faculty structure, the university has a small number of modest research centres. Like other PhD awarding universities in Romania, VGWU also has an “Institution Organising Doctoral Studies” within which there are two doctoral schools, in the fields of medicine and biology. VGWU also has an Institute of Life Sciences which is active in a range of fundamental and applied research areas, often with direct societal impact and in cooperation with other academic and economic partners in Romania and abroad. VGWU also has a network of seven branch campuses in smaller towns across western Transylvania, offering VGWU programmes to a broader student population.

In terms of governance structures, VGWU is governed by a Board of Directors, comprised of eleven members. Of these, five are representatives of the VGWU founders (Arad County, Prefecture, Municipality and Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese), with the others being academics or senior administrators from the university, including the General Director and the Financial Director. The Board meets monthly and is responsible for all financial and administrative issues, including VGWU properties and investments.

The VGWU Senate has thirty-six members, all of whom are elected, representing each faculty. 25% of Senate members are student representatives. The faculty Deans and Vice-Deans are not members of the Senate. The Senate elects the VGWU Rector and receives the Rector’s report every month. The Senate sets the academic norms and standards for VGWU, and can influence student numbers and programme developments, as well as ethical and quality assurance issues. Any Senate recommendation with financial consequences is brought by the Rector to the Board for decision.

The VGWU Rector is elected by all VGWU academic staff, through the Senate, independent of the Board. The Rector reports to both the Board and the Senate. Vice-Rectors are nominated by the Rector and approved by the Senate. The term of office for Rector and Vice-Rectors is four years; office-holders can be re-elected once. The Rector and Vice-Rectors participate in Senate meetings, and attend most Board meetings. The Rector provides the link between the faculties and the Board, and makes proposals to the Board on academic matters such as starting up and closing down study programmes, research projects and collaboration with



external partners (academic or other). Decisions on these matters, and indeed on any matter with financial implications, are taken by the Board.

Each VGWU member of academic staff is evaluated every year, in a process led by the Rector. The results of this annual evaluation are presented to the Board, and the salary of each staff member can be differentiated based on this performance. A similar annual performance review process takes place for administrative staff, led by the General Director.

The General Director is responsible for finance, property and administration, and reports to both the Board and the Rector. The General Secretary reports to the General Director and is responsible for all secretariat activities, e.g., student admissions, faculty and branch campus secretariats, the international student office, etc.

2.2 Analysis

The team had intensive discussions on the topic of VGWU governance and decision-making, involving a wide range of groups from both academic and administrative functions as well as with representatives of the VGWU founders. These discussions took place in a focused manner, bringing together all relevant players across these broad themes. Key enablers of other important administrative functions across the topics of research and outreach, teaching and learning were also included in discussions, in order to build up a complete picture of the governance and decision-making processes at VGWU.

During these discussions the team emphasised the methodology of the Institutional Evaluation Programme, built around the following questions:

- 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?

One of the matters discussed under this topic was the role of administration vis-à-vis the traditional academic sphere. It appeared to the team that at VGWU a tendency had developed towards two parallel worlds. But at the same time the university leaders and decision-makers needed data, analysis and well-developed proposals on key matters regarding the university's current and future options. It was considered that greater overlap between the administrative and academic functions, together with a more inclusive approach to building teams and responding to challenges, would be helpful for both groups.

Having considered the situation carefully, the team identified a potential missing link – in the form of an academically-trained professional analyst, with the term “analyst” to be



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understood in a broader sense as a person who does not only aggregate data but draws conclusions and indicates choices for future options – who would help VGWU work its way through this challenge, and ensure that high quality data and analysis be brought to the relevant committees, levels and decision-making fora where this is needed, across a range of matters. Such an additional function, which in the understanding of the team would represent a new type of role for a VGWU staff member, is intended to enable academics to play their roles fully in these areas, not to expropriate them from the institutional decision-making process.

The team also identified a potential problem with the current roles of the Senate and Senate commissions, and queried whether their remit was still fit for purpose. It was not clear to the team how these roles – as understood by the team – link to the remits of other VGWU committees and commissions established under the rectorate. Given the need to ensure clarity of governance and decision-making processes, and to make the best use of all people’s talents and time, there appeared to be considerable overlap or indeed unnecessary duplication between various such bodies. The team considered that a leaner, clearer and more efficient internal structure would allow VGWU achieve better outcomes, while at the same time investing less valuable staff time and effort.

Putting in place a more “fit for purpose” internal governance and decision-making structure, as well as ensuring that VGWU can use better strategic data and analysis in this improved decision-making process, would allow VGWU to improve significantly its strategic planning capacity. The university has already identified – through the self-evaluation and other internal processes – a list of necessary tasks and action items for the coming years. These now need to be brought together into a coherent and achievable action plan, which goes beyond a simple listing of strategic objectives. The team highlights the need for VGWU to draw up a strategic plan underpinned by strategic objectives and a series of fit-for-purpose, concrete action lines. Such a plan is very different from a mere “to-do-list”. To that end, the team suggests that VGWU should consider a “SMART” approach to such an action plan, i.e. it should be organised and operational by being Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound.

The team spent some time during its visits to VGWU exploring these topics, because despite their somewhat technical nature they are key to a number of important medium- to long-term strategic planning challenges currently facing the university. It became clear that VGWU needed to engage in an enhanced strategic planning process, due to the current changing external environment. These external changes essentially revolve around changing demographics in Romania, including in the Arad region, and the importance of new EU research funding policies vis-à-vis existing or other possible Romanian funding sources. In the opinion of the team, the challenges facing VGWU are not of the type “whether to introduce a new programme in Faculty A or modify something in Faculty B?” The much bigger challenge which needs to be addressed is what “will VGWU be in 2025?”



Having generated a discussion around these medium- to long-term questions, the team heard a variety of interesting and potentially promising proposals — many of which were mutually compatible — regarding how VGWU could maintain its ethos and commitment to the Arad region, while responding effectively to significant changes in the external environment. Such suggestions, which appear to be plausible at least as a starting point for further exploration (with the team abstaining from suggesting any premature conclusions), were for example:

- Reconsider the existing blend between a broad educational and research approach versus a more focused approach, including closure of less attractive study programmes;
- strengthen the bio-medical fields;
- enhance cross-border activities;
- become more attractive to staff and support increasing quality of teaching and more proficient research.

However, the open questions behind all the proposals raised were how they could be interpreted and validated, and then transformed into a coherent action plan?

From the perspective of the team, the challenge facing VGWU at the present moment is to put in place a methodology which can ask the right questions and lead to relevant answers, in other words to design an effective planning and change implementation process. This requires a number of elements, which were discussed during the team's meetings at VGWU. They include the use of SWOT and other analyses (building on the work started in the self-evaluation report); greater use of good data input and building a strong evidence base (as discussed earlier in this section of the report); a structured consultation process with relevant stakeholders, involving a broader range as these together with the VGWU founders, and validation and correlation of the responses received from this broad range of VGWU stakeholders and partners, with this validation and development of conclusions being supported professionally; and exploring a variety of possible scenarios, allowing for in-depth consideration of a number of realistic options for the future of VGWU.

This is a substantial project for VGWU to undertake, and will need to be led by a steering group, with expert input from professional staff (as discussed earlier in this section) and with a strong culture of internal and external communication as an integral part of the process. Such a project will in itself lead VGWU to explore the concept of quality in a very deep and meaningful manner, with profound additional benefits. The team is convinced that – if undertaken in a realistic and coherent manner – such a project will lead VGWU to a continued strong and vibrant future.



3. Teaching and learning

The team engaged in informative and stimulating discussions on the topic of teaching and learning with a broad range of groups and actors from across VGWU, including students. In addition, the team benefited from considerable feedback from VGWU's external partners, including employers, regarding these broad topics. A focused round-table discussion on teaching and learning was organised at the request of the team, involving all those with key institutional functions in these areas within VGWU. These discussions were structured around the key questions of the IEP methodology.

3.1 Objectives and validation: *What is the institution trying to do?*

During the course of the team visits, it became evident that VGWU's objectives and profile were built around being useful and meaningful to Arad society and the broader region, across its teaching profile and its research orientation, and indeed a broader range of services to society (see Section 4 below). However, this obvious objective is not included in the university mission statement mentioned in the self-evaluation report, not nor does it stand out strongly elsewhere in the documentation provided. The team therefore recommends that the implicit and effective institutional mission be made more explicit, as part of making VGWU's mission and profile clearer and easier to communicate to both internal and external audiences.

As well as its own institutional objectives, VGWU must also fit within a set of more generic higher educational objectives, which apply both in a Romanian and European context. These include:

- creating new knowledge and developing research skills and capacity;
- preparing students for sustainable employment;
- working with students to encourage their personal development;
- contributing to a broader system of educating students and university stakeholders for democratic citizenship and the promotion of democratic values.

As part of the Romanian academic community, and the broader European Higher Education Area, VGWU must also respect and work towards a number of broader higher education policy objectives, as defined through the Bologna Process. These include:

- the promotion of social inclusion, i.e. equity of access to higher education for all students, and equality of opportunity for success;
- ensuring transparency of educational offer and of degree content, through the use of student learning outcomes, course descriptors, public information, etc.;
- ensuring that students can avail of learning paths through their study programmes which suit their own objectives and learning needs; and that the university



provides lifelong learning opportunities for a broad range of learners, allowing them to build their own educational portfolios to improve their lives and careers;

- ensuring that learning results (i.e. degrees, diplomas and study credits) are recognised fairly and objectively, allowing students to benefit at VGWU from prior learning they may have undertaken in different universities and contexts without having to repeat that learning unnecessarily at VGWU.

The IEP evaluation process has, in the opinion of the team, helped VGWU identify these explicit and implicit objectives more clearly. The team encouraged VGWU to integrate these more formally into its internal and external communication, and more explicitly into the considerations regarding VGWU's strategic development over the next period.

3.2 Implementation: *How is the institution trying to do it?*

The team found plenty of evidence that VGWU was implementing the concept of "employability" into a broad range of its work with VGWU students, particularly through various aspects of teaching and learning. This implementation includes a strong emphasis on internships, and a good start to a career guidance service for VGWU students. The team found that employability is considered when programme content and curricula are reviewed, and that in recent years seven VGWU study programmes have been closed, as a result of graduates not being able to find jobs on graduation. The team also found evidence of healthy discussions in some parts of the university regarding the conceptual process of moving towards student-centred learning, which to some extent is linked to problem-based learning and the involvement of students in research projects, and competence orientation, both involving a re-design of the educational and pedagogic process. These reforms have already taken place in a number of VGWU programmes but may still need to be implemented throughout the entire university.

There were also positive signs and examples in many parts of VGWU regarding the explicit development of soft skills which students would need when seeking employment. Foreign language courses for all students are provided across four semesters for all students; students are being prepared to adapt to uncertain environments; learning takes place in groups and teamwork is encouraged; there are "science clubs", "Arad academic days" and similar structures which encourage student initiatives and additional learning; internships and placements are supported, and there are also practically focused courses available on entrepreneurship and starting a business.

Regarding the lifelong learning agenda, the team found that VGWU is aware of this agenda and looking at it as an opportunity to expand and enhance its role in the Arad region. The university is aware of the need to provide flexible learning for a range of diverse groups who could benefit from such opportunities for their personal and professional development, and is



already responding to explicit and implicit demands from regional stakeholders for lifelong learning services, some of these on a contractual basis.

In terms of developing an e-learning service, which could potentially be linked to a lifelong learning service but is also relevant for all other study offers, the team found that VGWU does not yet appear to have considered this opportunity fully, and it was not clear if a policy is in place to allow this to happen. In any case, given the investment needed for a successful e-learning strategy to be implemented, VGWU would need to identify potential partners (academic and/or commercial, in Arad or further afield) to operate effectively in this field. There would however be possibilities to link an e-learning strategy to VGWU's work in the area of internationalisation.

However, the question that arises from these discussions for VGWU as a whole is: How are these holistic concepts of employability and lifelong learning fully integrated into learning and teaching objectives across the university, into all curricula and all additional activities? While curricula are being tuned to respond to workplace demand and employment opportunities, based on feedback mechanisms from employers, VGWU also needs to be aware of curricula becoming too specific as some jobs change rapidly. Sustainable employability is not synonymous with being prepared for narrowly defined employment options. Such short-term solutions may not lead to long-term employability, and VGWU needs to prepare its students for a rapidly changing regional and more global labour market.

The team would also encourage VGWU to question how much cross-disciplinary learning is really taking place within the university, and how is this encouraged and facilitated. Likewise, the extent of lifelong learning provision so far is not clear, and is certainly not well enough developed to allow for a broader response to the challenge of enhanced employability for the Arad region, in this area, VGWU would need to develop a more coherent policy approach and to explore the potential for lifelong learning more consistently, using the expertise and contacts available through its various structures, including the VGWU incubator (see Section 4 below).

Revisiting the university's current concept of modularisation may help to address the differentiated demands currently facing VGWU. In the opinion of the team, there are likewise good opportunities to increase the range of options for students by using the existing undergraduate modular structures in a more flexible way, including in a lifelong learning context, while still respecting the various requirements of ARACIS (the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). The team heard that it was possible to refocus existing modules to incorporate broader employment and learning options. However, given the importance of flexible pathways for student learning and enhanced employability, and the need to encourage greater inter-disciplinarity, VGWU may wish to seek other universities that would also be interested in lobbying for policy change in this area.



In terms of training and developing enhanced research capacity to serve the Arad region, and to create new knowledge for broader societal benefit, the team found evidence of a number of activities underway at VGWU. These include the introduction to scientific writing methods and techniques for all students; a partially introduced problem-based learning methodology, evidence of an experimental basis to study programmes in some faculties; good examples of field-based research preparation across postgraduate provision; a number of science clubs and similar student-focused initiatives to encourage innovation; and many examples of student involvement in research projects. The broader topic of research will be covered under Section 4 of this report.

Likewise, the team found good examples of preparation for democratic citizenship and personal development across a range of VGWU activities, and which were highly valued by students. These include allowing an open platform for discussion and debate within the university; valuing the concepts of democracy and self-management as part of VGWU educational objectives; promoting teamwork and equality of opportunity to allow all members of the VGWU community to participate as partners on an equal level; and encouraging students to take initiatives, responsibility and autonomy.

However, in a similar way to the question above with regard to implementing the VGWU objective of employability, the team also asked whether these various examples are coherently brought together as part of VGWU-wide policies promoting these objectives, and ensuring they are integrated into all curricula and into all aspects of pedagogic, research and administrative practices. Taking a more strategic approach to these important objectives would add considerably, in the opinion of the team, to the value already brought by VGWU to the Arad region. It would also add a further valuable dimension to the university's existing quality assurance processes, allowing it to focus further on VGWU's "fitness for purpose". Bringing these issues together into a coherent philosophy and practice, could contribute considerably to development of a specific "VGWU brand".

The questions of quality assurance and quality improvement in the field of teaching and learning will be addressed in Section 5 below.



4. Research and service to society

The team engaged in in-depth discussions on the topics of research and service to society with a broad range of academics and administrators from across VGWU, as well as with VGWU's external partners, including employers and partners in various fields. A round-table meeting focused on the topics of research and service to society was organised at the request of the team, involving the key VGWU players in these areas. These discussions were structured around the key questions of the IEP methodology.

4.1 Objectives: *What is the institution trying to do?*

VGWU is aware of the need for a university-wide research policy and is actively developing one. The rationale currently used by VGWU for its choice of research activities and projects is a pragmatic one, based around national and European funding opportunities, the regional relevance and interest of the research in question, and the intrinsic value of that research when linked to VGWU's own internal strengths. The rationale also includes elements of service to society, through the delivery of applied research projects in a number of fields with a range of regional partners, and of internationalisation, especially in building up a suite of activities with partners in Hungary, thus in both cases opening further opportunities for VGWU capacity building and funding.

Research management is divided between two vice-rectors for research, one for research funded through European sources, and the other for research funded from national funds, who also covers VGWU's entrepreneurial activities, including the incubator. Both vice-rectors are involved in monitoring the databases established by the technology transfer department, which record papers published by VGWU staff in national and international journals. Both vice-rectors are likewise involved in identifying opportunities for postgraduate and lifelong learning training opportunities, which can be financed by local authorities or other agencies.

A VGWU Institute for Life Sciences likewise exists, which works at national and international levels, and also has an entrepreneurship element. This institute works directly with the University Clinic, provides services, evaluates projects and conducts other activities. Two doctoral schools also exist, in the faculties of medicine and biology. PhD students from these schools can participate in the work of the VGWU Institute of Life Sciences, and also through VGWU's partner network in other universities and countries (e.g. in research projects and summer schools in Hungary and Serbia).

While this suite of research-related activities can be seen as a pragmatic approach to developing VGWU's capacity in this area, it contains a number of inherent caveats which should also be considered. The current approach is by its nature a short-term strategy, based on existing funding opportunities, and as such presents a risk to VGWU. The recent sharp decline in domestic funding is evidence of this, and suggests that VGWU should focus on



other EU funding sources with a longer-term perspective. This would oblige VGWU to address its projected future 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. Thus, research policy and practice may need to be more long-term focused and holistic, in terms of seeing them as part of an overall developmental strategy covering staff planning and staff development, more focused investment, and succinct alignment of study programmes especially Masters and doctoral programmes. Such an approach would also allow VGWU to communicate more clearly both internally and externally regarding what it is trying to do in the research area, and in its outreach to society.

In terms of service to society, VGWU also runs a number of branch campuses in smaller towns across the western Transylvania region. These campuses provide undergraduate programmes, mostly on a modular basis, linking in to those same programmes in Arad. However, little mention was made of these branch campuses by VGWU staff during the team visits, and it remains unclear how VGWU views their ongoing status or purpose. The significant demographic declines now facing Romanian higher education generally may impact on VGWU's business model for these branch campuses in the future.

4.2 Implementation: *How is the institution trying to do it?*

The team explored with VGWU the process by which VGWU make strategic research choices. There is established research activity in the bio-medical and ecological fields, built around the Institute for Life Sciences, and it is noteworthy that - according to verbal information supplied to the team while at VGWU - this Institute houses one of only four doctoral schools in biology in Romania (and the only one in a private university). There is also a certain level of research activity in economics and humanities, although since there are no doctoral schools in these fields, any PhD candidates — including VGWU staff — who are undertaking doctoral studies in fields outside the medicine and biology areas must register at another university. Within the doctoral schools, programmes are tailored for each student, with basic modules for all within that school, and other modules for each student as needed. Each PhD supervisor has four to five students, and while these supervisors must be approved by the Ministry through a strict process, this has the overall effect of limiting the number of potential doctoral students. Across all faculties, VGWU currently has approximately forty-five staff members in total who are qualified to supervise PhD students, and an intake of approximately twenty doctoral students per year, most if not all of whom are part-time. The recent opening at VGWU of co-tutelle arrangements should help alleviate this situation, particularly in a broader range of specialities.

Other research areas do not yet appear to have been identified explicitly in any strategic way, although they may already de facto exist. The identification of research fields at VGWU appears to be largely bottom-up, subsequently endorsed by the respective faculty and by



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VGWU itself. The team found little evidence of policy leadership in this area by the university, and little VGWU-wide forecasting or research identification processes. While the team was informed of a number of recent cases where VGWU had recruited research staff from other countries to boost its capacity in certain areas, the current range of “priorities” appears to be spread thinly across many small areas of research activity at VGWU. In the opinion of the team, this situation presents a number of risks for VGWU, given the ongoing decline in domestic research funding and the need for more concentrated research capacity in strategically identified areas, which can be successful in raising funds from EU and other sources.

The recent establishment of the VGWU technology transfer department is an important step for the ongoing development of VGWU’s research and outreach to society. This department has been established to support innovation and transfer, to monitor the research performance of staff, to support research management, and to identify funding opportunities. Since the establishment of this department, VGWU has submitted at least ten national patents, some in collaboration with other Romanian research institutions; no patents had ever been submitted by VGWU before 2010. Despite these early successes, the main role of the technology transfer department is to maintain the database on university level research and to assist with research management for different research teams. This professional service is proving to be a good investment by VGWU, with recent increases recorded in VGWU research impact factors. While in real terms these improved achievements remain modest, in relative terms they represent a very important step forward for VGWU in establishing and developing its research and outreach capacity.

Another VGWU initiative in encouraging research and service to society is its technology and business incubator “Ita-Goldtech”. This incubator was established in 2006/2007 in order to fill a gap identified by VGWU between the university and the business community in the Arad region. Its main role is to start new businesses, and it offers a number of facilities in this respect, for any kind of investor (including students) such as location, equipment, legal and business advice, secretarial support, etc. The incubator provides support for up to two years, after which the business needs to stand on its own two feet. The incubator also acts as a matchmaker between industry and VGWU, in both directions, and helps to identify and provide training for regional business. In undertaking these activities, the incubator can also act as a source of innovation and new ideas for VGWU, as well as providing a service for the broader Arad society. There is now potential for those VGWU researchers who have recently submitted patents to use the incubator to commercialise the results of their research.

The team learned however that the numbers of clients using the incubator’s services have so far been low, although a number of start-ups have been successfully supported. Given this situation, the incubator has taken the initiative also to address researchers directly to assist them in finding practical partners for staff and student projects. Such partners include



distributors and producers in the automotive industry, marketing and accountancy firms. The incubator has also identified local training needs which can be provided by VGWU for regional companies.

Given the successful early-stage development of these VGWU research and service initiatives, the team recommends that VGWU take this activity to its logical next step, and establish strong links between the doctoral schools, active research groups, the technology transfer department, and the incubator, in order to encourage all those involved in research and outreach activities to use the combined strengths of these various structures to broaden and deepen their own specific research and service activities.

Greater synergies between the incubator and the doctoral schools, in particular, would allow young researchers to gain exposure to and training in entrepreneurial matters, and also help them to identify research facilities which may not be available at VGWU. Using these structures in a linked-up manner would of course not only be of interest to academic partners, but also to VGWU's enterprise and business partners, thus promoting and strengthening VGWU's mission and profile.

The questions of quality assurance and quality improvement in the area of research and service to society are addressed in Section 5 below.



5. Quality culture

The team explored the central issue of quality culture at VGWU as part of its discussions across all the other thematic areas, and with all main groups of actors, both internal and external. These discussions followed the four key questions of the IEP methodology, around which this section of the report is likewise structured.

5.1 What is the institution trying to do?

During its discussions with VGWU groups and leadership, the team addressed the very broad question of what quality in teaching, learning and research is, in order to understand the educational concept and understanding of what constitutes “quality” at VGWU. On the basis of those discussions, and an examination of the documentation provided, the team’s conclusion was that there was no explicit statement or expression of this at VGWU, but that current practice included a number of aspects.

- a) Compliance with ARACIS. It was agreed that this was a necessary requirement for VGWU, but not enough to respond to the broader questions of quality assurance, quality enhancement and quality culture.
- b) Benchmarking. VGWU does compare itself – informally and implicitly – with some other universities in Romania and abroad, particularly in neighbouring Hungary, which it sees as academic standard setters in a number of other fields. This implies that VGWU is following those examples, but not necessarily finding its own path.
- c) Labour market demand and student satisfaction. These are clearly in use at VGWU as part of the quality assurance suite of activities, and are linked to the university’s mission and profile in the Arad region. They do however represent a very specific aspect of quality assurance, with limited broader application.
- d) “Fitness of purpose” and “fitness for purpose”. This could involve, for example, designing curriculum and teaching process to serve the particular purpose of a given programme. While it was repeatedly affirmed that programmes were designed to meet particular purposes (e.g. ensuring student employment), there was limited explicit evidence of how adequate processes for design and validation are established and operated throughout VGWU.
- e) Excellence. This would establish the university as a beacon which shines out to others, meaning that it needs to create, maintain and build on its own distinct profile. It appeared to the team that VGWU had some realistic achievements and further ambitions under this heading, but had not made these explicit even within VGWU’s own internal governance structures, or yet optimised the potential of these through strategic planning and resource allocation methods.



While all of these aspects of quality can be correct in themselves, the team formed the opinion that the current concept of quality at VGWU was to various degrees a blend of these. The rationale for choosing this particular mix was however not clear, nor was it clear to the team how this choice – and therefore VGWU’s quality aspirations – relate substantially to the mission and vision of VGWU.

In terms of quality culture, the team found a strong tradition of respect, discussion, and inclusive decision-making at VGWU, as well as strong evidence of participation by different university actors and stakeholders in these discussions. The team also found evidence of effective support, trust, and transformation across the university, coupled with bottom-up initiatives and implementation processes. These are all essential pre-requisites for an effective quality culture, allowing for sustainable quality enhancement over a period of time.

However, as already stated, the team was not able to ascertain how these desirable attributes are matched and complemented by a clear strategic decision-making process. In particular it was not clear to the team how the mechanisms for ensuring that holistic quality issues and VGWU’s long-term interests in ensuring ongoing quality are fully considered. In the opinion of the team, these aspects need clearer leadership and governance structures, and some additional elements of top-down implementation.

5.2 How is the institution trying to do it?

Although Romanian legislation for quality assurance in higher education was first published in 2006, VGWU has been working on this theme since an earlier date. The head of quality assurance department edited a QA manual for the university, which was revised following the 2006 legislation. The team was informed that VGWU’s internal QA system covers all the various elements which should feed into QA, including students and their professional associations.

Based on discussions during the IEP visits, the team identified a number of main quality assurance methods in the field of teaching and learning. These included the following:

- Self-evaluation is undertaken by all academic staff, based on quantitative achievements. This has been developed on three levels, each corresponding to a level of salary scale. 40% of the self-evaluation is based on teaching work, and 60% on research work. The team was informed that there has been a recent shift in focus towards some qualitative as well as mainly quantitative elements in this, but this shift mostly concerns staff activities in the research area, see below. This self-evaluation aspect is important, because it feeds into a broader staff performance metric which has an impact on each academic’s salary.



- Evaluations are made by students every semester of courses, seminars and practical training sessions. This form of evaluation, which is conducted by online questionnaire as part of the examination session, is then analysed within each VGWU faculty. It is not clear how this student evaluation is linked to the broader learning objectives and VGWU strategic ambitions, as discussed in Section 3 above.
- A systematic checking of due process takes place concerning the quality of VGWU examinations procedures and results, after every examination session.
- All graduates are tracked into employment, including the quality of this employment, and the graduate's retrospective perspective on the quality of education received.
- Personal feedback is provided between students and staff.
- Feedback is obtained from employers through informal channels and broader VGWU networks.
- A quality manual exists which guides university staff in quality matters.

The team likewise identified a number of main quality assurance methods in the field of research and service to society, including the following:

- The self-evaluation by academic staff also includes their research activity, representing 60% of this self-evaluation (see above).
- The VGWU technology transfer department monitors staff research performance.
- The team was informed that the VGWU Senate research commission uses data from these datasets (and others), and cooperates and collaborates with the two relevant vice-rectors to improve long-term research strategy, e.g. increasing doctoral and post-doctoral scholarships.
- There did not appear to be any systematic way of monitoring staff activity related to service to society, beyond the research and technology transfer field.

It was not clear to the team what role the Senate commission plays in monitoring performance and quality of research, or how — in practice — these three distinct strands feed into overall strategic discussions, planning and decision-making processes regarding research policy and research activities at VGWU.



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5.3 How does the institution know it works?

VGWU has a variety of processes and procedures which monitor the quality of the teaching and learning, research, and – to a lesser extent – the services to society which it offers.

At faculty level, the faculty councils are important players regarding the analysis of the self-evaluations undertaken by staff members, and of the student evaluations. The team was informed that a peer-review system is also in place, which is performed by the faculty councils. However, the faculty councils do not appear to work with the Curriculum Commission which was initiated two years ago and which has been tasked with the job of re-invigorating VGWU's academic programmes.

At an overarching VGWU level, two observations are striking. At the level of management, the role of the VGWU QA department was not clear to the team, as it did not appear to manage or monitor any of the above QA mechanisms. At the level of governance, the team learned that there is no VGWU Senate commission for quality related to issues of study programmes. The QA department periodically submits a report to the Senate, but it was not clear to the team how this report is considered or what actions arise as a result.

There is evidence to show that some of the QA measures in place (as mentioned in section 5.2) have been successful, at least on the research side: for example, the number of publications by VGWU staff has increased since 2010 by 20%, and the impact factor of these publications has increased by 300% over the same period. Special management measures applied since 2010 result in an academic receiving a financial bonus for each article published which achieves a positive impact factor. Likewise, publication success can result in the registration fee for one international conference per semester being paid for the researcher, as well as a salary increment.

However, it was not clear to the team whether the research activity at VGWU has any positive impact on teaching and learning at the university, i.e. whether there were any links between the QA mechanisms which operate in different fields at VGWU.

The key question which remains unanswered for the team is how do the various QA activities feed into broader strategic discussions and planning at VGWU. Beyond issues of individual performance, there appears to be little which brings the different QA strands together into a coherent and strategic action line. The QA department does not appear to play this role, and there is no QA Senate commission, and the various faculty councils do not appear to link with the broader university policy developments now underway.



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5.4 How does the institution change in order to improve?

The team was informed of a number of quality improvement mechanisms at VGWU, mostly in the field of teaching and learning. These were linked to the various QA mechanisms discussed above, and focus around pedagogical training, including interactive teaching methods, for all interested staff, not just new employees. A system of peer observation and feedback of teaching methods for quality improvement purposes is also in place. These mechanisms are also used for those staff whose teaching has been identified by student feedback or other QA mechanisms as needing improvement and support. The work in these areas is undertaken at faculty level, with the support of the department for teacher training, which has courses at the start of each year to help staff to develop improved teaching methodologies and practices. Examples of topics covered in such courses include the use of new technologies in teaching, and raising student confidence to find new ways to solve problems across different fields.

The team also identified a number of areas where it felt that VGWU could make better use of its various existing QA mechanisms, for broader quality improvement and enhancement purposes. One of these would be to establish a strong link between curriculum reform and academic performance, and feed the information and results from the various QA mechanisms into the work of the Curriculum Commission.

Another suggestion would be to bring together the student, alumni and employer feedback processes under “one roof”, ensuring that they are all run as professionally as possible (while allowing subject-related differentiation where needed), and allowing synergies between them in terms of process but more importantly, in terms of follow-up. The team suggests that VGWU could achieve significant benefits from a more structured approach to these evaluations and their follow-up, looking beyond issues of individual performance towards the collective improvements which VGWU can make, learning from an enhanced evidence base.

The team therefore recommends that VGWU create a new quality unit, led by a professional quality officer, to assist VGWU in developing this broad area systematically and make sure that high quality data, information and analysis, drawn from a broad range of sources (both internal and external) is used at all levels across VGWU. This recommendation should be seen in tandem with the recommendation regarding enhanced data analysis capacity, under Section 2 above.



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6. Internationalisation

6.1 What is the institution trying to do?

While VGWU implicitly operates in the context of the Arad region, this region is in many respects a cross-border region, given the proximity of Hungary and Serbia, and the importance of every-day cross-border links in economic, social and cultural terms. It is no surprise therefore that VGWU has developed a range of strong international links with the academic institutions in this broader cross-border region, both in the fields of teaching and learning, and also in research and outreach.

However, despite these cross-border links, student mobility between VGWU and universities in other countries remains low, and is mostly limited to ERASMUS mobility. This is due to limited funding and high levels of competition between students. The team was informed that VGWU is now increasing its support for student mobility, and that it was expected that both outgoing and incoming mobility, including for student work placements, would increase. These low overall levels of mobility have been partially compensated by the proximity of Hungary, Serbia and also Slovakia, since students with less financial support find it easier to travel to neighbouring universities in these countries for summer schools, specific projects, etc.

The team heard repeatedly that increased internationalisation at VGWU was an important component of ensuring successful student employability. A working knowledge of other languages, including those of neighbouring countries, is highly valued. In order to attract international students to Arad, VGWU now offers three undergraduate programmes in which the language of instruction is English, as well as one which is taught through French. VGWU has been successful in attracting a broader range of international students to these programmes, and in doing so has enriched the learning environment in Arad for all VGWU students.

However, the team likewise heard that language barriers continue to exist more broadly at VGWU, with many students not able to benefit from these opportunities. The existence of language courses for all VGWU students to improve their foreign language competences, over four semesters, is an important initiative, and as many students as possible need to be encouraged to take these in order to enhance their own skills and their employment opportunities.

VGWU has also actively been trying to develop its suite of joint degrees with partner universities. However, joint degrees in Romania are the subject of specific accreditation requirements. The team was informed that VGWU has devised a way to ensure all new Masters programmes – if they are taught through a foreign language – can become joint



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programmes, which will allow VGWU to build on new co-tutelle opportunities with its partner universities abroad.

The team was informed of very low levels of financial support for staff mobility, although incentives exist for research staff whose publications achieve certain impact factors, to encourage them to develop further international activities. Hungary was frequently mentioned in terms of international activities in the research field, including capacity building and co-funding for cross-border research projects.

The proposed development of more co-tutelle arrangements will certainly necessitate further investment in staff mobility and international activity.

6.2 How is the institution trying to do it?

The VGWU strategy for internationalisation has been designed around a simple philosophy: first develop tangible cooperation with a partner institution, and then sign an agreement once cooperation has been well established. Proposals for such international agreements are normally first discussed at faculty level and then proposed to the rector, although the rector can also make proposals to a faculty. In either case the proposal requires proper consideration across the relevant VGWU structures.

Given the reasons outlined above, VGWU's focus for partners at Masters and PhD levels so far has been with universities in neighbouring countries. The difficulties in establishing joint degrees have helped this cross-border focus. However, if the obstacles to joint degree programmes are overcome, then VGWU will need to consider a broader range of potential partner universities. In this context, based on the information available so far, it was not clear to the team how such international partnerships and programmes would be linked to the *de facto* priority research fields identified in the faculties. There is a need to link together the planned research prioritisation process, and the ongoing development of postgraduate programmes, whether these are with international or domestic partners.

Based on the modest success so far in terms of building the numbers of internationally mobile VGWU students, the VGWU department of international relations has brought together those students who were abroad as a group of "mobility ambassadors", to help build enthusiasm and awareness among possible other VGWU students. The expected doubling next year of the internal VGWU resources to support these students, albeit from a modest base, is a positive signal of intent and should allow many more VGWU students to enjoy the benefits – both direct and indirect – of an international learning experience.



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

Given the limited overall integration of international teaching, learning and research experiences in the daily life of VGWU, internationalisation *per se* has not yet been explicitly addressed through VGWU's quality assurance processes. The university does however have sufficient evidence to show that cross-border and international collaboration, both in teaching programmes and in research projects, is attractive for VGWU staff and students, and brings broader benefits for the university as a whole. In the opinion of the team, internationalisation can add to the significant opportunities which are opening up for VGWU in the coming years, as it consolidates its various priority activities around key cross-cutting themes, in order to strengthen its fundamental mission and profile in serving the Arad region.



7. Conclusion

The team would like to thank all those at VGWU and across its external partners who met with the team during its visits, and who helped the team understand the current context and the challenges and opportunities VGWU is facing. It is clear from these discussions that VGWU has already identified these challenges and opportunities, and has proved its ability and willingness to address these as part of its constant process of innovation in order to serve the Arad region.

The team found that the internal culture at VGWU has been an important asset in the university's achievements over the last twenty years. This established culture of trust, respect and communication now needs to be combined with a new culture of leadership, planning and implementation, to allow VGWU to face new challenges with confidence.

The team considers that VGWU enjoys a number of comparative advantages compared to other universities in Romania, such as good regional support, a strong internal financial position, experienced senior management personnel, and a good track record through other recent turbulent periods.

VGWU has a key group of motivated and capable persons who can lead the university through the next period of change. The team is happy to have been able to contribute in a small way to this process.

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

Governance:

- ensure that high quality data and analysis is brought to the relevant committees and decision-making bodies;
- introduce a leaner, clearer and more efficient internal structure to allow VGWU achieve better and more efficient outcomes;
- design an effective planning and change implementation process;
- integrate academic and administrative sectors more effectively, while developing improved strategic planning capacity.

Teaching and learning:

- make VGWU's institutional mission more explicit and easier to communicate;
- increase the range of options for students by using the existing undergraduate modular structures in a more flexible way;
- ensure that VGWU's learning objectives are integrated into all curricula and into all aspects of pedagogy, research and administrative practices.



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Research and service to society:

- establish strong links between the doctoral schools, research groups, the technology transfer department, and the incubator, in order to use the combined strengths of these various structures to broaden and deepen VGWU's research and service activities.

Quality culture:

- establish a strong link between curriculum reform and academic performance, and feed the information and results from the various QA mechanisms into the work of the Curriculum Commission;
- bring together the student, alumni and employer feedback processes under "one roof", allowing synergies between them in terms of process and follow-up;
- create a new quality unit, led by a professional quality officer, to assist VGWU in developing this broad area systematically and make sure that high quality data, information and analysis, drawn from a broad range of sources (both internal and external) is used at all levels across VGWU.

Internationalisation:

- link together the planned research prioritisation process, and the ongoing development of postgraduate programmes, whether these are with international or domestic partners.