

Strategic direction

It was clear to the team that the university had approached this international evaluation process with serious intent. The university saw the benefits of such a self-evaluation process in the context of the need to respond to the on-going economic difficulties in Europe and the reform of the higher education system in Romania.

The university also saw the IEP as an opportunity to drive forward a range of organisational and financial imperatives. The team noted that the new management team at the university had only been in place since May 2012 and there appeared to be strong backing for the new rector and a willingness amongst the wider senior management group to address the need for better communication and transparency in the policies and operation of the university. Both staff and students confirmed that there was a greater degree of openness in the university over the last 10 months and the team noted with interest the rector's initiative 'LBUS Dialogues'. Every week a department/faculty presents its achievements to the wider university and the rector sees this as an impetus for bridge-building across subject disciplines in teaching and a platform for multi-disciplinary research. The team felt that this was an important dimension in the university's development.

In the meetings with staff from faculties it was not clear how many of them had been actively involved in the self-evaluation exercise although it was evident that, on the whole, they were aware of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER); it was freely available online and there was a view expressed in some faculties that the report broadly matched reality. Amongst some staff, however, there was a feeling that the reality of the situation at the university was somewhat better than how it was presented in the SER. The team had the impression that the consultation exercise that was part of the self-evaluation exercise had only been partly successful and that some voices in some faculties had not been heard. In a broader sense it appeared that many in the university were still at arm's length from the change agenda. In summary, in order to fulfil its stated desire to be a comprehensive university the team recommends that LBUS considers carefully how it can reflect opinions from across the spectrum. While the economic environment was a crucial factor in the future development of the university the team recommends that there should also be allowance for the traditions flowing from the humanities and the wider cultural significance of the work of the university. In the view of the team this might help in securing the identity of the university.

The team noted that the University had a keen sense of the funding challenges facing it with the significant decrease in student numbers in recent years associated with a decline in the HE student demographic, a more challenging entry baccalaureate and the availability of fewer programmes.

The university indicated that, on the whole, it saw its position as a teaching and scientific research public university within the Romanian higher education sector as appropriate. It did not appear to harbour ambitions to become an advanced research and teaching university. There is, however, the ambition to improve the university's ranking within the tier of teaching and scientific research institutions as well as a desire to reinforce its national reputation and build a greater awareness of its work in the wider international community.

The team were advised that the university saw the maintenance of the comprehensive nature of their programme offering as being of critical importance to its future sustainability. At the same time there is a desire to cut back on some specialisms and focus on the highest quality programmes. In terms of the quality of programmes, the SER indicates that in the 2011 national ranking process for Masters and Bachelor specialisations, 11 were ranked in Category A; 27 in Category B; 24 in Category C; and 8 in the D/E categories. The university indicates that improvement strategies are to be focused on those programmes in category C. This struck the team as imposing an undesirable ceiling to improvement strategies. The team recommends that these strategies should not only be focused on those programmes in category C but should also look to sustain A-graded programmes, seek to improve programmes from B to A and finally look at the potential for improving D/E programmes where there was strong evidence of student demand.

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The urge to consolidate the current position of the university came through very strongly in meetings with the rector, the self-evaluation team and the newly formed Strategic Working Group. Some features of this consolidation emerged as (1) an emphasis on undergraduate education (2) a focus on recruitment from the regions around Sibiu (3) the need to counteract competition from institutions in the wider Romania.

However, it appeared to the team that some of the indicators on recruitment posed a considerable challenge to this idea of consolidation. For example, in respect of the academic year 2012/13 the team understood that the university had a maximum capacity of 6,000 places allowed for by ARACIS. However, based on the university's strategy, 4,000 places were made available on undergraduate programmes; 3,000 applications were received and 2,100 students were accepted on programmes. Clearly if this pattern continued, for any length of time, the university would find it very difficult to sustain its desired student numbers of around 15,000 ? 16,000.

Equally the team was struck by the reduction in number of distance-learning students, which it understood had declined from a peak of 9000 to the current figure of 1000. This appears to be the result of declining demand although there is also some scepticism in the university as to whether such programmes are appropriate for some subject disciplines. It was noted that there had been a degree of investment in this form of learning and this had been highlighted in the SER; but for the moment it appears to the team that this is not a priority for the university. While the principles underlying the use of technology in teaching and learning could be common both to distance-learning programmes and to programmes delivered in the university in the traditional way, the team was advised that ARACIS (Romanian Quality Assurance Agency) accredited distancelearning programmes separately from 'standard' programmes and this stifled some of the potential for adopting technology-aided learning in standard programmes.

While it was suggested that some of the decline in recruitment might be made up by an increase in Masters-level students it did not appear to the team that there was a considered strategy to bring this about. Indeed while there was evidence of a desire to rebrand the university to help create a re-invigorated sense of identity for the university, there appeared to be a rather narrow view of how recruitment prospects might be improved with the local regions being seen as the boundaries of that ambition.

Mission

The university's mission statement is summarised as follows:

- the promotion of education and research in accord with the requirements of a society based on knowledge and lifelong learning, integrated into the European and world context;
- the contribution to the local, regional and national development, from a social, economic, cultural and political point of view, through a significant commitment to the environment;
- thorough knowledge and original contributions to the main fields of science and technology specific for the beginning of the 21st century; flexible, interactive and continuing education for both students and graduates of higher education institutions;
- open to interaction with the economic, social and academic environment at a local, national and international level.

This is enshrined in an updated charter approved by the Senate (2011) that also meets the requirements of national legislation.

The team found these tenets to be largely confirmed during meetings with staff and students and understood that the university's senior management were looking at fresh ways in which this mission could be delivered. However, a number of factors were seen to act as barriers to development. These included (1) the ways in which Romanian law prescribed the curriculum and other aspects of the work of the university (2) the frequency of

legislative change in Romania which made planning, especially in the financial domain, highly problematic (3) the turbulence in the national and wider European economy.

Governance, management and institutional decision-making

The managerial structure, stated in the SER as determined by law, involves a hierarchy of Senate; Executive Board; Faculty Councils and Department Councils. The Rector chairs the Executive Board and, importantly, is elected following a vote of all staff in the university. This is seen as a critical communitywide endorsement of their programme.

The team noted that a strategic working group had been tasked by the rector to develop a new blueprint for the university (LBUS 2020). Both in the SER and in meetings the university has stressed the need to re-think its direction. It has also put at the forefront of this process of change a greater degree of managerialism highlighting the need to create a core of professional leaders. At the same time there is an expressed desire to increase the role and responsibility of the Senate in the decision-making process and a belief that there are clear benefits from decentralising power to the faculties and making them more responsible and accountable.

It was noteworthy, however, in terms of the role of faculties, that the SWOT analysis in the SER characterised faculties as showing 'a passive attitude regarding strategic decisions and their application'. One dean noted, in response, that new faculty management teams had only been in place for a short time 'the same time as the rector and his new team' and this placed obvious constraints on the current extent of change. The team also noted that while there was a strong, stated commitment to the involvement of students in decision making, there was no student representation on the Strategic Working Group and the conclusions emerging from the university's SWOT analysis did not really carry forward recurrent themes identified in the student focus groups. The team recommends including a student on the strategic working group in order to promote further students' involvement in governance.

The team recognised these as key issues for the university and were encouraged by the openness of the discourse in this respect. The team strongly advises the university to gain a greater understanding of how it would balance some of these competing dynamics 'central authority in driving forward change together with greater autonomy for the faculties; wider involvement in decision-making via the Senate while the Executive arm needs to be increasingly flexible and fleet footed in responding to the many challenges facing the university.

While the SER included a number of diagrams and commentary on the organisation of the university it was not clear whether effective decision making operated within the institution. This was particularly true in relation to the deliberative structures. The team was keen to move beyond the theoretical and explore how, practically, the university responded to questions about student retention, progression and achievement and how career outcomes were tracked. It was also important to track the outputs from research and the performance of the bureaucracy. It was understood that a number of elements of the deliberative structure were required by law and the team had the impression that this did not always support effective decision making. For example, in the area of quality management there were two sub-committees. In discussion, it was difficult to establish how far these met the requirements of a robust quality assurance (QA) oversight system or how, more specifically, they responded to identified weaknesses in the monitoring of quality in the university. It did not strike the team that these were necessarily the best vehicles for supporting a quality culture in the university. It was also apparent that too many decisions went through several layers of scrutiny/approval before a final decision was made. This could result in a lack of ownership of arrangements at the appropriate level. Broadly, the university needs to ensure that it avoids duplication of decision making and that the executive and deliberative arms of the university combine in the optimal way.

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In this context, there was an acknowledgment that the university needed to challenge a mind-set stuck, in some ways, in the past. The team wondered whether this paradigm shift could occur when there seemed to be potential structural barriers to change. The relationship between the Executive and the Senate is clearly critical and it is important that this relationship gives impetus to the change agenda that is emerging in the university.

In the light of the various challenges facing the university the team explored the question of financial sustainability in a number of meetings with staff. Even though the university had to respond to considerable changes in the funding of universities in Romania the university appears to have been able to balance its budget over the last four years. The impact of this approach had been most keenly felt in expenditure relating to development where the budget had fallen by almost 16% from 2008 to 2011. While it was understandable that the university wanted to retain a tight control on expenditure there was a risk that such a decline in investment might undermine the potential for development in, for example, research, the wider IT infrastructure or staffing to support quality assurance processes. In these circumstances the team recommends that further thought should be given to investment in development over the next four-year period.