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Vision, Mission and General Context

The IEP team is confident that UASVM will continue to play a leading role in Romanian society. However, from the perspective of the IEP team, this ambition needs to be viewed in the context of the considerable constraints placed upon the university by its operating environment, including financial unpredictability, a challenging socio-economic environment, and national legal reforms. The team formed the view that this will present UASVM with challenges and difficult choices as it plans for the future. This situation is acknowledged in the UASVM SER and SWOT analysis where the university identifies the principal constraints and threats as including: the low level of state funding, with limited recovery prospects; excessive Romanian and European bureaucracy; unstable and unpredictable national legislation; demographic decline; and poor economic forecasts.

From discussions with UASVM staff at all levels, the IEP team noted the various ways in which such constraints impact on the day-to-day operation and future planning of the university. The team therefore wishes to put forward its view that national bodies with responsibility for higher education should take full account of the impact that the unpredictability in the external policy and planning environment might potentially have on the ability of universities to plan effectively in key strategic areas of operation. In summary, the IEP team notes that this operational context will present UASVM with significant change management challenges and difficult choices as it plans for the future under its new governance arrangements. In seeking to overcome these constraints and challenges, and as it builds towards the future, the IEP team encourages the university to be more outward-looking and to learn from best institutional practices elsewhere in Europe.

Addressing future challenges

In addressing future challenges, the IEP team identifies six strategic priority areas for the university:

- Governance, decision-making and planning;
- Learning and teaching
- Research
- Service to society
- Quality culture
- Internationalisation

Governance, management and academic organisation

The SER and other documentation made available to the IEP team provided an informative picture of the present governance, organisational management, and strategic planning arrangements at the university, together with helpful accounts of recently introduced changes. When combined with the productive meetings held with university managers, staff, and students, this enabled the team to understand the nature of these institutional

arrangements and the use made of them.

The university's academic organisation is structured into seven faculties, each of which is divided into two or three departments. The faculties are: agriculture; horticulture; animal sciences; veterinary medicine; land reclamation and environment; biotechnology; and management and economic engineering in agriculture and rural development. The faculties' fifteen departments deliver a wide range of study specialisations, with a heavy emphasis on vocationally-oriented study programmes, at Bachelors and Masters levels, structured according to the Bologna cycles system. The university offers 24 programmes at Bachelors level, 26 at Masters level and six at doctoral level. There are two doctoral schools, of which one – the doctoral school for engineering and plant and animal resources management – is interdisciplinary. The other is the doctoral school for veterinary medicine. During the past fifteen years, the university has also developed a research institute and seven research centres, some of which have a degree of legal and financial autonomy and are formally accredited by the National Authority for Scientific Research (ANCS). The specialisms covered by these entities are: microbial biotechnologies; applied biochemistry and biotechnology; agro-food products; sustainable agriculture; integrated fruit growing; rural engineering and environment; comparative oncology; animal diseases; animal production; and the interdisciplinary laboratory for heavy metal study and food chain modelling. Together, the research centres and the research institute are the principal focal points for generating income through research. The centres undertake multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary projects primarily, and are organised through drawing on the research expertise and laboratory facilities of faculties and departments.

The most recent student data made available to the IEP team in part reflects the overall demographic decline in Romanian society. The figures for 2012/2013 showed a total of 12,122 enrolled students, a significant decline from 2008/2009, when the number of registered students stood at 17,675. While numbers for full-time Masters and Doctoral student registrations are marginally up over that period, Bachelors registrations declined by around 1 500. For part-time registrations, Masters and Doctoral registrations have disappeared over the same five-year period, while Bachelors registrations have been approximately halved from a figure of 4 663 in 2008/2009. Registrations for foreign students, while low in any case, have declined from 105 to 78 over five years, and are largely at Bachelors level. On a positive note, the IEP team learned that UASVM has recently been awarded additional state-funded student places: 50 for Bachelor, 40 for Masters and 15 for PhD. Other data made available to the team revealed a drop in staff numbers from 880 to 848 between 2008 and 2012 and, within this, a decline from 808 to 694 of legally constituted teaching positions. The data shows a decline from 24.8 per cent, to 15.5 per cent, in tenured teaching staff under the age of 35. Associate teaching staff levels declined from 228 to 181 over the same period. The team was informed that part of the background to these changes is the situation arising from the 2008 financial crisis, following which restrictions were placed on staff recruitment.

Alongside the constraints and uncertain external environment described above, UASVM has managerial, administrative, and financial autonomy to manage and direct its own affairs. This autonomy is exercised under the provisions of the University Charter, and according to the regulations of the national education law of 2011. The latter regulates the conditions of the university's autonomy and public responsibilities. As the IEP team learned, financial autonomy is itself constrained by the national economic conditions of Romania and the wider region. The main sources of income for the university are the block grant it receives from the state according to criteria primarily based on student numbers. The institutional contract provides for core funding, for student scholarships, for the institutional development fund, as well as some funding of investment objectives. This income is supplemented by income from student tuition fees, and funding received through grants and research and project-related sources, both national and private, and through involvement in EU projects. The university also benefits from some income accrued from its ownership of various assets, including agricultural properties and businesses. The team learned that, in common with other Romanian universities, since 2009, when the National Authority for Scientific Research (ANCS) suspended competitive research and development funding, the university's financial environment, and the scope for generating extra income, has become even more challenging and restrictive. For example, the SER estimates that for 2012/2013, income from research projects is not likely to exceed eight per cent of total revenue.

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Since taking up his appointment in March 2012, the rector has worked within the new governance structures to carry forward the plans set out in his Academic Management Plan (February 2012), which forms the basis of his four-year mandate. As is described in the SER, the rector is the legal representative of UASVM, and is also responsible for the university's executive management. The senior management team, re-constituted following the appointment of the rector, includes four vice-rectors, approved by Senate on the recommendation of the rector. They hold responsibilities, respectively, for: education and quality management; research and innovation; students and internal and international relations; and assets management. The senior management team, which meets on a weekly basis as the Administrative Council, includes vice-rectors, deans of faculty, the general administrative director and the student representative.

Since 2012, arrangements for university governance, management, and decision-making are centred on the two principal bodies at the top of the organisation. These are the Administrative Council, as described, and the University Senate. The president of the Senate is elected by secret ballot. Membership of Senate, which meets on a monthly basis, includes representation from all faculties, and its composition makes provision for 25 per cent student representation. From the point of view of the functioning of the university's organisational structures and pattern of governance, the IEP team recognised the central importance of the UASVM Senate. Its powers are extensive, and its deliberations include discussion and approval of UASVM strategic plan, staffing matters, admissions and enrolment, external relations, and general academic affairs. A significant feature of the business of the Senate is the attention it gives to proposals received from the Administrative Council, regarding the strategic and administrative affairs of the university. Senate is assisted in carrying out its responsibilities through the work carried out by five Senate Commissions, or sub-committees. These commissions are responsible, respectively, for: regulations, decisions and records; education, research and quality; public image, and internal and international relations; students and trades unions; and heritage and economic activities. They are mirrored on the executive management side of the organisation by a group of councils, each one of which is chaired by the relevant vice-rector. The IEP team learned that the university's intention is for there to be efficient interfaces between these operational management bodies, and the deliberative and policy functions of the Senate Commissions.

In reflecting on these arrangements, from the IEP team's perspective, of particular importance for governance and management purposes is that according to the national legal reforms of 2011 the university's statutes require that the rector does not chair the Senate. Further, neither the rector nor the faculty deans are eligible for membership of Senate, though they may attend by invitation, as agreed by the President of the Senate. During meetings and through reading institutional documentation, the IEP team explored the workings of these arrangements more closely. The team formed the view that, while on one level they provide for a deliberative role for the Senate and a management executive role for the rector and Administrative Council, in reality the situation is more elaborate than this. As the team understood it, as the rector is required to gain Senate approval for matters of strategy and policy, together with ratification of decisions and proposals made by the Administrative Council, this means that, in practice, the Senate is also able to act as a policymaking forum or legislature. In the judgement of the IEP team, the Senate is therefore able to influence management practices even though it has not been formed as a management body. The team notes that these leadership and governance arrangements, including the position and responsibilities of the rector and the composition and responsibilities of the Senate, are still relatively new. The team had initial concerns that the new arrangements imposed by the 2011 national law may be a source of tension, including in the area of Senate/Rectorate relations. But in the view of the team, it is too soon for their impact to be fully judged. The balance of the team's view, however, is that to date these changes have been received well by the wider academic community of UASVM. In formulating this view, the team was advised that it is an expectation of the new law that the Senate will support the Administrative Council and the rector. Further, the team heard that Senate members (president, vicepresident, and executive secretary) are invited to join meetings of the Administrative Council, and that good communication links are in place between that body and the Senate.

The IEP team also took the opportunity to consider the deliberative and decision-making bodies at faculty and department levels. Deans of faculty, who are appointed by the rector on the recommendation of the faculty

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councils, are supported by vice-deans, with responsibilities in each of three domains: education and quality; research and resources. The governing body of each faculty is the Faculty Council, which has overall responsibility for management of the faculty and each of its departments. These councils refer matters of policy, strategy, and resources to the Administrative Council, as and when appropriate. Department Councils are responsible for overseeing academic activities, research, and study programmes within the department, and for making proposals to the Faculty Council. The team noted that the Faculty Council includes representatives from each department in the faculty, and also student members. Faculty councils are responsible for faculty development and strategy, and appointments to teaching positions. They also have a responsibility for allocation of budgets and resources to departments. The team was advised that both of these bodies contain student representation in the same proportion as the higher committees, as described above.

However, the team noted that this requirement for student representation and involvement does not currently apply to the faculty permanent commissions, which act as faculty subcommittees to the main faculty council in areas such as teaching and research, student affairs, and quality. This means that, while students are represented on the faculty councils they are not involved or represented on the permanent commission for Quality Evaluation and Assurance (CQEA) at either faculty or department level. As a consequence, students do not have direct access to the discussions and formal deliberations where student-related issues and concerns are most likely to be raised. Nor do they have direct access to the minutes of these meetings. In the view of the IEP team, this is a matter upon which the university should reflect, with a view to rectifying this situation at an early opportunity. Therefore, while noting the generally good opportunities for student representation and involvement in university processes, the IEP team recommends that arrangements should be put in place for student representation on faculty sub-committees and for the minutes of these bodies to be made available to all students.

In looking across the governance and management arrangements described in the foregoing discussion, particularly those at the top of the organisation, the IEP team took a close interest in future prospects for strategic thinking, the effectiveness and quality of decision-making, and the university's capacity to influence and manage change. Here, the IEP team formed the view that the future efficiency and effectiveness of the university's governance is dependent in no small measure on the extent to which Senate, the Administrative Council and the Rectorate, which includes faculty deans, are able to communicate and cooperate on strategic matters going forward. In connection with this, the team was conscious that UASVM faces difficult challenges and choices going forward. To be able to meet these challenges, effective strategic planning processes are essential to the success of the university. Further, from the IEP team's perspective, there is a distinct possibility that hard choices may need to be made regarding resource-related matters. These issues are discussed next.

Strategic planning and organisational development

With the foregoing observations in mind, the IEP team wished to give due consideration to arrangements for institutional and faculty strategic and operational planning, to the university's processes and mechanisms for monitoring progress in support of change management and to resource allocation processes. The team concluded that while there are encouraging features to these matters, there is room for improvement. The team has sought to reflect on this perspective in some of their recommendations. In doing so, team members fully acknowledge the challenges faced by UASVM in improving the quality of teaching, the level of research, and the university's external profile. The team recognises that given financial constraints not all aspirations can be met and that this will entail careful strategic decision-making and hard choices.

The IEP team noted that the Rector's Operational Plan (2013) and institutional strategic priorities for the immediate future due to be published in that document, were not available at the time of the team's visits. Therefore, the team were unable to assess fully how the institutional development framework, and the extensive range of quite specific objectives set out in the Rector's Academic Management Plan (February, 2012), would be taken forward to implementation and subsequent monitoring. The team was also interested in obtaining an

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understanding of the linkages between institutional-level strategic and operational planning, and planning at the faculty level. From the team's perspective, this was an important aspect of organisational coherence and cohesion in planning matters. This matter took on even more significance in view of the rector's stated commitment to securing a greater degree of devolution to faculties on operational matters.

On close examination of both institutional level and faculty level strategic and operational planning documentation, it was evident to the IEP team that although all such documents contained clearly stated objectives, and made reference to 'measures', the targets that they referred to did not have attached to them any values against which actual quantifiable progress could in practice be measured. From the team's perspective, the ability to monitor performance is an essential ingredient of transparent and accountable strategic and operational planning. Therefore, while the underpinning processes observed by the team, whereby faculty plans were informed by input from the level of department and study programmes, and while the Faculty Council sought to monitor progress of the faculty operational plan on a three-monthly basis, it appeared to the team that the monitoring mechanism was incomplete. Similarly, though the team had been unable to make a full assessment of the Rector's Operational Plan (2013), the evidence from the Academic Management Plan (February 2012) would appear to point to a similar difficulty. Here, while the university-level plan would be informed by inputs from faculty plans, the team was not assured that specific values were being attached to the extensive lists of targets that were, in practice, measurable only if they had values attached to them. On the basis of these findings, the IEP team advises that in all strategic and operational plans, progress against planning targets and indicators should be monitored through the use of quantifiable measures and values.

The IEP team reflected further on additional aspects of strategic and operational planning processes. The team heard that the university's strategic and annual operating plans are informed by input from each of the vice-rectors' domains of responsibility and from faculties' own strategic and operational plans. The Administrative Council plays a key role in drawing this work together through coordinated discussions about all education and research matters. The team noted that these discussions precede further discussion and approval by Senate. From the perspective of the IEP team, and in light of earlier observations regarding the desirability of close alignment in governance arrangements, it is essential that these bodies work closely together. Therefore, to underpin the strategic direction of the university going forward, the IEP team recommends that the Senate and Rectorate should take steps towards securing greater collaboration across and between UASVM faculties on all matters of university policy and strategy.

In reflecting on these planning matters, the IEP team wish to further encourage the greater attention that is now being paid by UASVM to the importance of robust and timely data for use in forward planning, at all levels of the organisation (for example, as is described in Section 4, the team note the intention to improve centralised data in the area of research). The team sought to assess the university's current capacity and capability for collecting data centrally, and for making such information widely available. The team gained the impression that to a large extent, data is currently largely faculty-based and is not aligned with central data needs. In the team's view, data should be collected, made available and used at all levels. Further, and in view of earlier observations on performance monitoring, there should be a greater focus on connecting data collection with planning, thereby resulting in strategic and operational planning which are more evidence-based and predicated on the use of data. Accordingly, the team recommends that the university ensures that strategic and operational planning are evidence-based and that use is made at all times of robust planning data and management information.

Finance and resourcing

The team's enquiries in this area led them to the view that there is a strong measure of central oversight of budgetary and financial matters. This is exercised under the joint overall authority of the University Senate and the Administrative Council. The latter body regularly addresses finance and resource matters, including those raised by faculties, such as acquisition requests. Such requests are approved by the general administrative

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director. The team noted that annual budget allocations to faculties are largely based on historical allocations and are linked to student numbers. The team was informed that one faculty which is better placed financially can give loans to another faculty that is in need. Research centres that generate income for projects are able to access the relevant funds awarded to them. The team learned that the central university budget is used to support the library and other student-related services.

The rector, vice-rector (assets management), the Administrative Council, and the University Senate are supported on matters of finance and administration by the general administrative director. That post-holder is responsible for managing financial accounting and other resource-related matters. In budgetary matters, the Budget and Finance Commission is under the supervision of the vice-rector. As noted earlier, while it is the rector who is the university's legally recognised signatory in financial matters, for financial governance purposes the University Senate takes the main decisions regarding approval of the UASVM financial strategy, the annual budget, and the allocation of resources. The rector is responsible for managing the implementation of the Senate's decisions, and for ensuring that the financial activities of faculties are monitored. The team was advised that all financial activities are subject to internal and external auditing, the latter by the Romanian Court of Accounts.

The financial year runs from January to December. While the budget is not finalised until the December meeting of Senate, in July of each year faculties make their budget requests for the following year. In early December, the Administrative Council draws up a draft budget for presentation to the Senate and conditional approval. This is submitted to the Ministry and until April the university operates with the provisional budget as approved conditionally in December. Should the university's expenditure profile in the first quarter exceed the final state allocation as confirmed in April, that overspend is deducted from the second quarter allocation to the university. The team was interested to learn that the university operates a 'top slice' mechanism, whereby 15 per cent is deducted from each faculty's budget allocation for general management purposes and overheads. For the faculty of veterinary medicine, the proportion is seven per cent.

From the documentation and data made available to the IEP team it was apparent that the university's revenue budget had peaked in 2008 and has declined since in real terms. In 2009 there was a sharp drop in research income, and tuition income has also declined over the past four years. The university has also experienced a significant decrease in income from private sources in relative terms. Inevitably, these uncertain circumstances have an impact on the financial and wider strategic planning that UASVM undertakes. In the view of the team this uncertainty should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, in the team's judgement, if the university is to meet future challenges, particularly in a situation where the state-funded unit of resource continues to decline, and where opportunities for generating research income are becoming more competitive, it will inevitably be faced with difficult choices in terms of resource planning and budgeting. Accordingly, the IEP team considers that in its future institutional decision-making the university should explore opportunities to use the annual budgeting and resource allocation processes to steer change in relation to agreed strategic planning priorities, perhaps by making use of its 'top slice' mechanism. This consideration informs the recommendation in section four regarding the future resourcing of research.