

Teaching_and_Learning_at_UASVM

The incoming Rector's Academic Management Plan (February 2012) placed emphasis on educational matters and included an extensive list of objectives for achieving academic success, and for improving the quality of learning and teaching. The Plan also signals a desire to bring about change in teaching and learning through introducing a different approach to educational processes and a new institutional perspective on these matters. The IEP team took this to mean that traditional approaches would be complemented with more modern and interactive methods. However, as is noted in section 4, the team learned that while actions were in place to develop a new institutional research strategy, it did not appear that a similar strategy was to be developed for learning and teaching. Given that 'taught' provision is so prominent in the university's academic profile, when compared to research, this appeared to the IEP team to be something upon which the university should reflect.

Nevertheless, the team was encouraged to note that faculty operational planning documentation indicated that objectives are set for improving curricula and for the development of teaching and learning, including more student-focused strategies. The team took a close interest in the way in which learning and teaching are reflected in the governance and management structure at senior management level, and in the committee structures at institutional and faculty levels. In the university's deliberative structures, oversight of educational matters is exercised by the Senate Commission for Education, Research and Quality Management. Senior management responsibility for educational matters lies with the vice-rector (education and quality management) who is also Chair of the Academic Council. This Council's responsibilities include curriculum matters, admissions, examinations and course content, but not learning and teaching enhancement it seems. The vice-rector also holds responsibility for departments, which include distance learning, teaching staff training and careers and counselling. The vice-rector is not, however, a member of the Senate Commission for Education. Bearing in mind the observations on these matters put forward in Section 2, in relation to the interface between the deliberative and management executive arms of the university's governance arrangements, in the view of the IEP team it remains to be seen how these arrangements will work going forward. From the team's perspective it is to be hoped that any duplication, overlap or tension between the formal committee processes and the management functions in an area of such importance as learning and teaching enhancement, will be kept to a minimum.

In considering arrangements at faculty level, the team noted that academic leadership positions of vice-dean, department head, and study programme leader, and the respective responsibilities for learning and teaching allocated to these post-holders, reflect the priority given by the faculties to the curriculum and to academic affairs. Each faculty has in place permanent commissions for teaching and research, and for initiation, monitoring, and evaluation of curricula. All study programmes are represented on faculty and department councils. The team also considered matters relating to plans and opportunities for development of the curriculum portfolio. The team noted arrangements for initiating and seeking approval for new study programmes, and observed that at faculty level this process commences with the establishment of a commission for programme development. These procedures appear to work well. Further, the team learned that, in addition to a commitment on the part of the rector to develop provision for lifelong learning (discussed more fully in section 5), some UASVM faculties are exploring opportunities for the development of joint study programmes with other European universities, and this is discussed in section 7. Attention is also being paid by some senior managers to the opportunities for interdisciplinary programmes and the resourcing efficiencies that this may offer. The team noted that such proposals must come from a faculty or faculties for consideration and approval by the Administration Council and by Senate. The team was advised that the ARACIS national register shows that there are few interdisciplinary programmes in Romanian higher education. However, the team learned that consideration is being given by university authorities for a proposal to be made to the Ministry for an interdisciplinary programme in Biotechnology and Veterinary Medicine. This is an initiative, which the IEP team wholeheartedly endorses.

The team explored with interest the progress being made in addressing some of the requirements arising from the Bologna Process in the area of curriculum design and development, and learning and teaching more generally. Having assessed these matters, from the perspective of the IEP team there remains scope for further work in several areas. This includes student-centred learning, the use of learning outcomes, and also the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching. The team notes that progress on these matters varies between faculties and

departments. In considering engagement with and awareness of the Bologna Process and associated principles, the team learned that structural changes had been introduced, and the duration of a Bachelor programme has been reduced from five to four years. Also, new disciplines and study plans had been introduced in recent years, student contact hours had been changed, and ECTS credit requirements addressed. The team was advised that all programmes accredited by ARACIS had been expected to meet Bologna curriculum reform requirements.

In connection with these matters, the team looked closely at how far use was being made of a learning outcomes approach to curriculum matters. From discussions with staff and students, and from considering documentation such as syllabus and discipline specifications, the team noted that while emphasis is placed on setting objectives and identifying competences, knowledge, and skills, this still falls short of a learning outcomes approach. Though increasing use is made of approaches for evaluating the application of knowledge and skills, there remains a tendency to assess knowledge at the expense of skills. Here the IEP team would draw the university's attention to the Bucharest Communiqué (April 2012), which urges the 'meaningful implementation of learning outcomes' and the need to include attainment of learning outcomes in assessment strategies. The Communiqué also stressed the wider significance of a learning outcomes approach in the context of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, and recognition procedures. With this in mind, the team remained unconvinced that Bologna principles had been fully understood and engaged with across all faculties and departments. Therefore, the team notes that while the Bologna Process has had a positive impact on UASVM, there is more work to be done, not least because this entails more than just curriculum change, important though that is. The IEP team recommends that the university should be more proactive in the area of student-centred learning by making more effective use of an explicit learning outcomes approach to curriculum design, development, and review, and ensuring that such an approach is aligned to student assessment and teaching methods.

In focusing on the broader question of student centred learning the IEP team took account of both staff and student views and experiences. While the team obtained a mixed picture, it was found that approaches to learning and teaching, and to pedagogy remained somewhat traditional and teacher-centred, with less emphasis on student self-directed learning than the team had expected. Further, some students appear to continue to be more teacher- and teaching-dependent than others who seemed more comfortable with newer methods and approaches. In assessing how far pedagogy had changed in recent years, the IEP team noted that while EU projects had facilitated increasing exposure to innovative approaches to learning and teaching, curriculum change tended to be more focused on content than on pedagogy or student learning. Therefore, while the team heard of some interesting initiatives and practices, such as the use of technology to enhance learning, there is scope to move further away from traditional approaches and to embrace and adopt more learner-centred pedagogies across all disciplines and to explore further the broader aspects of learning and teaching under the 'Bologna' umbrella.

In reflecting on these matters, the IEP team formed the view that, at its present stage of development, and given the top-level commitment and ambition to move towards more innovative and modern approaches to learning and teaching, the university should assess how it can make best use of the good practices that are beginning to emerge. Here, the team took account of the functions of the Training and Staff Development Department. However, in the view of the IEP team, while noting the good work being undertaken in its particular area of responsibility for the broader training of teachers, this department does not possess the necessary expertise to promote and facilitate enhancement in learning and teaching for university-level purposes. Currently therefore, the university does not have a centrally located staff development mechanism for enabling those staff from UASVM faculties who are exploring best practice in learning and teaching to be brought together for the purpose of exchanging ideas on student-centred academic practice. Nor do faculties appear to have in place individuals who might provide leadership in taking forward the desired innovation in this area. With this in mind, the IEP team proposes the establishment of a regular cross- University Learning and Teaching Enhancement Forum to act as a focal point for the sharing and dissemination of good practice in all areas; learning, teaching and assessment, with representation from all faculties through the active involvement of 'faculty learning and teaching champions'.

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A further, more specific concern that came to the IEP team's attention was the high student dropout rates in several of the university's faculties revealed in institutional student data. The team took the opportunity to discuss this matter with staff, including senior managers and with students. From their experience in other higher education institutions and other national contexts, the team acknowledge that student retention and dropout present all universities with challenges, to varying degrees. Moreover, it is recognised that some factors, such as financial or personal matters, are less within the control of a university than educational factors. Even so, from the team's perspective, it is essential that formal arrangements and mechanisms are in place to monitor such problems and that these are supported, where possible, by swift intervention measures and by exit surveys. Accordingly, in the view of the IEP team urgent action should be taken by the university to address the problem of high dropout rates in some faculties.

During each of their visits to UASVM, IEP team members met with a range of students from various disciplines and from different levels of study. The team was particularly impressed with the enthusiasm and capability of students, and with the commitment and enthusiasm of teaching staff and professors. Students spoke well of the accessibility of teaching staff and professors, and the support they provide.

The IEP team also considered students' views and experiences of the various services and facilities provided or made accessible by UASVM to its students. Students were generally positive about their learning environment, and indicated that access to library, IT facilities, databases and laboratories was acceptable.

The team also considered arrangements for provision of scholarships and grants of various kinds and noted that these were available from both state and UASVM sources and were awarded either on the basis of merit (for academic performance) or student needs (family or personal circumstances, or medical condition). Further, the team noted that arrangements for personal tutorials, covering students' personal or administrative needs, have been improved in recent times with the introduction of a group personal tutorial system. However, the team learned from the SER that the student counselling and careers centre, introduced in 2006, had not proved to be successful. In the view of team members, and having taken account of student views, a modern university should have in place a functioning service to provide both counselling and careers advice and support. Therefore, the team recommends that the university takes steps to ensure that the Centre for Careers and Counselling is made fully operational and accessible to students. In their deliberations on other support services, from the views expressed to them by students, team members formed the view that provision of health, welfare, and medical services is good, as are referral arrangements for accessing city services in these areas.

In reflecting on all of these matters, the IEP team wish to record the marked pride displayed by UASVM students and staff in their university. For the majority of students whom the Team met, UASVM was the first choice higher education institution.