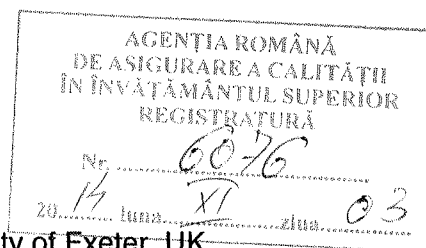


Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad



Report by Malcolm Cook, Emeritus Professor of French, University of Exeter, UK

The context for this visit was a limited confidence judgement the previous year so there was naturally some tension in the air for this particular audit. The self-evaluation document attempted to address the shortcomings of the previous visit. My visit was supported by two very able and helpful colleagues, and I thank them for their assistance during my visit, offering language support and setting up meetings with a range of people in the institution. I could not have prepared this report without their care and support.

At the time of the visit (October 29-October 31, 2014) the University web site in English boasted that the institution was working with a high degree of confidence from ARACIS, which was clearly not the case. The Erasmus pages on the web still talk of the University having a high degree of confidence. Again, this was not the case. The information is and was misleading and potential students could be given wrong information about the University. The page relating to Erasmus students reads: "\Aurel Vlaicu\" University of Arad is a state higher education institution, accredited and acknowledged by ARACIS as presenting a \"high degree of confidence\", continuing the tradition of university education in the Arad area which started with the: Theology Institute (1822), the Livestock and Veterinary Medicine Faculty (1947), the Engineering Institute (1972).

[See <http://www.studenterasmus.ro/uni.php?id=2>]

This misinformation is at least careless and would suggest that the web pages and information about the University are not properly managed. Students may well have applied for entry to the university under false pretences, and this can be dangerous.

This is a relatively young institution, still perhaps trying to find its way and its status in Romania, Europe and the World. The University has grown in recent years, developing faculties (of which there are now 9), so it now presents itself as a slightly curious mixture of disciplines, some of which clearly work together, others that do not. There may be a time in the future when the institution will need to think carefully about its shape and its mission. It is clearly much appreciated by the people from the region with whom we talked, in particular the employers who spoke highly of the contribution made to the region and of the quality of the graduates they employed. But it would seem that there are gaps in provision that the employers would like to see filled, in particular the provision of German language teaching as a major. It is also apparent, from our meeting with alumni, that there is an alumni community that is perhaps not being used as effectively as it might be. Alumni will often provide a free resource for advice, teaching updates, work placements etc. Some of the students stated that in some faculties there was insufficient provision of fieldwork, although clearly such provision may well depend on particular disciplines. It is clear that there are small pockets of research excellence and the university is encouraging the growth of external grant income, perhaps as one of the few ways of increasing the external income into the University. Realistically this is perhaps one of the few ways forward - it is unlikely that the University will ever be a major research institution, but that does not mean that it cannot be ambitious when the occasion arises, and apply for grants that are appropriate for its disciplines. The major challenge will be one of sustainability; what happens when the grant runs out? Will the University be able to finance the ongoing research and the consequent staff and material costs? At the moment the University operates a highly centralised budgetary process with all money being kept centrally. This results in delays and a certain awkwardness and money is sought by Deans etc. as the need arises, which is surely regularly. Would a devolved budget not make life easier for all concerned? Does the lack of devolved budgets suggest a lack of confidence? Should the outsider ask where is the locus of power in the university? The local business community clearly sees the University as a valuable resource,

supplying a qualified workforce for the region; but in the longer term, such a view may not be in the University's interests – of course it must serve the region but it must also have greater ambitions.

The various sites seem to be in relatively good condition, although some are a little dated and seem to reflect a previous era. The teaching rooms that we visited did not seem to be over full with students. There seem to be no lifts in most of the buildings so students and staff with disabilities are clearly going to find life hard if not impossible. Most teaching is done at a site which, at the time of the visit, was undergoing serious refurbishment, building new laboratories to accommodate a major research project. It must be said that the heating in various parts of the University, in some buildings, seems a bit capricious and some students could be seen working in their coats. The sports area is first class and well equipped and the university has its own medical cabinet with a full-time nurse and the capacity for emergency treatment. There is also a dental surgery used by students. The sports hall is available for hire, providing some limited income generation. The central library is relatively small but with access to electronic resources that may not be a problem and although the opening hours are not generous by UK standards, this was not a subject of complaint from students who clearly had no intention of working in the library at weekends... There are also specialist libraries in faculties and the entire collection is available on a centralised online catalogue. Students appear to be well catered for and have the benefit of good quality residences. While there is some truly fascinating work going on at the College of Art and Design, the building would not pass health and safety standards in the UK. The corridors and stairs are full of interesting art work but in the case of fire they would present a real danger to staff and students. There should perhaps be an assessment of risk in this area, perhaps in other areas too.

There would seem to be a lack of money across the institution, so that many jobs are being carried out by staff who are generally too well qualified for particular tasks. This will naturally have an adverse impact on research and research activity. The lack of depth in the departments and faculties would seem to lead to the conclusion that this University is unlikely to be a major research player unless it can move to a position where it begins to concentrate on particular strengths. But the political identity of the institution is not likely to take it in this direction. The university is governed by what appears at first sight to be a wholly democratic process so that all people in leadership positions tend to be elected. The Rector is elected only for 4 years, which limits the capability and perspective for long term change and management. There is a body called an Academic Council chaired by a previous rector that seems to hold significant power in the university. For an outsider it is difficult not to say impossible to see where the strategic thinking of the university takes place, where the decisions are enacted. Strong leadership may be required, one that will take decisions that may not be appreciated by all. Staff complained, perhaps with some justification, that they were doing 16 hours of teaching and were expected to do research for a salary of 200 euros a month. This is clearly not going to encourage staff to invest heavily in research. Within the institution there is evidence of committed and passionate teaching - the full-time permanent staff is 100% Romanian, which is not the profile of an international university. Again, the reasons for this are essentially financial. Romanian salaries are simply not competitive in the international market. A meeting with newly-appointed staff was positive; there were no complaints or criticisms of substance - salaries were lamentably low but this was not a surprise; the teaching loads were high, 16 hours a week for beginners is a lot and many institutions in other countries allow a gradual increase of contact hours over 2-3 years until the maximum load is attained. This is to be recommended if it can be done within the law and there are no financial penalties for the individual. Lack of finance means that attendance at major international conferences overseas is high impossible so that young researchers are not testing their ideas before an international audience.

The careers and counselling office is managed and run, essentially, by two full-time staff, with energy and dedication. They achieve a lot: working with local high schools to discuss and encourage university admission, working with students as they study and prepare for future employment, working with alumni as they are employed in their first jobs, and working with employers with whom they maintain contacts for support and guidance. There is some limited further support and there are faculty representatives who work with this office. They are currently working as partners in a



European project and students I met spoke enthusiastically of this work. But this operation does seem to me to be very risky, based on goodwill and hard work but also on the particular energy of the two individuals - there seems to be no future planning in this area, no younger or less qualified person learning the basics of the job (or jobs). Oddly, some of the alumni with whom we spoke did not seem to be aware of the provision offered by this office. It is also clear that this office could serve as a much more powerful and effective interlocutor with the business community, providing valuable work placements, listening to their needs, and providing an effective forum. But the people involved could probably not take on any more major tasks. An effective business office that brings in business and consultancy work will pay for itself in time.

There are 44 Erasmus agreements ably managed across a range of countries, but this is relatively small scale, the numbers being governed by the amount of external finance that is provided nationally. One person manages this operation and has written an informative guide for Erasmus students. Lack of money reduces the range of possibilities for students who clearly cannot afford to go to high cost countries. There are currently no agreements with the UK.

Autonomy

The University strikes me as excessively bureaucratic with countless commissions and regular reporting processes. This may be a result of national politics but there is little doubt about the amount of wasted energy that is being expended in this area. It is difficult to assess the efficacy of this activity but I would certainly recommend that an effort is made to assess what is important and what is not, what works and what has little effect. Too many people are employed doing work that is outside their specialist discipline; too many qualified staff are undertaking duties for which their qualifications are not required. There seems to me to be a lack of low level administrative staff - no doubt this is a result of lack of finance but when the situation allows it, a major reassessment of administrative duties might be beneficial. The University is constrained by financial limitations. While there is good evidence of research grant capacity there are areas that might be developed, working more effectively with local businesses, undertaking applied research to produce valuable income.

Major universities have the power and the energy to act promptly to enact rapid change. New courses and programmes can be introduced with adequate external review and input. At the moment it would seem that new programmes have to be approved centrally. This is a slow process that discourages innovation and stifles inventiveness and experimentation.

Lack of stability

Throughout my visit and in a number of different contexts, staff complained about the regular changes that needed to be enacted because of a change of national policy. Strength is built on a stable foundation and this is something the university seems to lack, perhaps in part because there is a lack of political stability at government level. The academic council that provides advice and paperwork for Senate occupies an odd position in the university. What status does it have? Is this a normal part of university governance? Does such a council undermine the agreed democratic structures of the university?

Conclusion

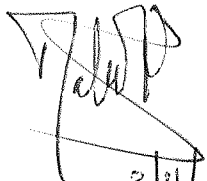
The evidence I have seen and read leads me to the conclusion that this is a relatively small institution which is struggling to operate effectively while working within a restricted budget. There is no real freedom, no real autonomy, no ability to break free from the financial shackles in which it is working. Even within the institution while there is ample evidence of gifted and hard-working staff, evidence of real appreciation in the business community, evidence of student satisfaction from present and past students, there is a careful balance of power between the senior management team and the Senate, but there is a danger that one cancels out the other. The Academic Council



seems to me to be surprisingly powerful, having a voice in the institution that must surely diminish that of the Rector and her team. The Rector has no budget with which to steer the University in a particular direction, and her hands are effectively tied by a Senate of which she and her team are not formally part. This may be a feature of Romanian universities but it is one that is foreign to me. It is hard to see how the University can manage change even if it should want it. This is a University with pockets of excellence but it is difficult to see how such excellence can be spread across the institution. The University needs more money, clearly, and it will need to find ways to generate income. But the University should surely want, one day, to look at itself and do a root and branch survey: what works, what does not, and how can it steer a way in which it would concentrate on its strengths?

Throughout my visit I saw evidence of satisfied staff and students. The latter were surprisingly uncritical, undemanding, complacent even. Staff, in spite of obvious shortcomings, especially with respect to salaries and research finance, were no more demanding than the students. Throughout the visit an air of friendliness prevailed. It appeared on occasion to be just a little too cosy.

The quality assurance system in the University is well planned and respected, offering some guarantees, naturally, of quality. What I failed to see in my short visit was the dynamism one might expect from a small, new institution. There is a worrying decline in student numbers, research excellence is patchy, teaching seems to be geared to the demands of the local job market. The horizons are limited and the next stage, surely, must be to concentrate on those areas where there is real potential; this might mean that other areas have no place in a university of this kind. However, in spite of all these shortcomings, I saw nothing that worried me unduly. The politics of the institution are confused, the financial position is not strong, but the students, perhaps because they were coached, and the staff, who were obviously selected for the occasion, seem content. The external community seems delighted with its institution. The misinformation I mentioned at the beginning of the report is of course a concern, claiming high confidence when this was not the case. There may be other reasons for confidence to remain limited but from what I could see in a short visit, this is a reasonable institution trying hard to succeed in its mission.


Andrew
Selten, 3/11/2014