

Evaluation of Danubius University, Galati, 1-3 June 2011.

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The University provided me with an excellent interpreter and I spoke both French and English with colleagues during the evaluation. We were treated throughout with courtesy and the meetings I requested were readily arranged. Nevertheless, the context of the visit must be fully understood and it seems likely that the students chosen to meet us were selected in the knowledge that they would be supportive and uncritical. This is one of the most difficult evaluations I have undertaken as I found it very difficult to have candid exchanges, especially when the groups were large. I comment further on this below.

The University is well presented in pleasant, well-maintained, modern buildings, impeccably presented and surrounded by neat gardens. A new building that will provide student residences is being constructed in close proximity to the University buildings and this is naturally causing some temporary disruption.

Learning Resources

The lecture halls and teaching rooms are well equipped and comfortable – I was a little surprised to find all the rooms in classroom style with no round table discussions being possible given the particular geography of the rooms. The University may well want to consider this as it moves elements out of its present building into the new building and inherits new space that can be used for teaching. It also leads me to suppose that much of the teaching is still done in traditional form with the teacher imparting wisdom from the front. This is unlikely to survive as the Bologna process strives to create students who are active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Round tables encourage discussion and participation, develop communication skills and are more likely to resemble future working environments. I got the impression that the students may be over-taught with many contact hours, certainly more than in many other European countries for the disciplines taught here.

The Library is well managed and appreciated by staff and students. Students and staff say it is well stocked and suitable for their needs. I was a little surprised that it was big enough to cater for the number of students on campus but the students made no negative comments about it. Nor did they comment on the opening hours, even though the library is closed throughout the weekend. Staff and students can request books according to a defined methodology and the Director of the library said that funding was not an issue. There is an online catalogue and the Library is introducing a new detection system to prevent theft. There is access to some, but not all, online databases; the Director explained that private universities did not benefit from the same online benefits as state universities. No formal evaluation of the library and its services takes place, which is to be regretted, since it would give a better idea of its strengths and weaknesses and the perception of it and its staff by its principal users. I was surprised to find that in the middle of the examination season when we visited,

very few students were working in the library. Clearly students at this university do not use the library as a working space, which is somewhat surprising.

The University seems to be well equipped with modern IT material. The students made no negative comments on this resource.

Strategic Thinking

In a meeting with the Rector I was told that the University is conscious of the need to match staff with student numbers. It was not clear to me if this has been done as it proved difficult to get clear answers to some questions, possibly because of language problems or possibly because the answer simply was not clear. The Rector is coming to an end of his tenure and the University is seeking a means of replacement. The governance of the University will no doubt be a priority for a new incumbent as it is not clear, to me at least, where the strategic thinking of the university is taking place – where is it going, what are its aims, other than the one weakness underlined in the SWOT analysis of the self-evaluation paper, the desire to create a doctoral school. I am not qualified to comment on the research strengths of the University but the Rector said that 5 applications had been made for the creation of a doctoral school, all of them unsuccessful. There must be good reasons for this but no real analysis was made clear to me. It may seem hurtful but I did wonder whether the University thinks it is better than an objective analysis would suggest it is. Does it really have research strength? Is there evidence of innovative teaching, of enhancement activity across the University?

International Relations

A good example of the lack of strategic direction is provided by the operation of the international relations office. The Dean of International Relations has taken on the task of managing Erasmus applications and of University partnerships with overseas partners – much of this activity seems to be initiated by enthusiastic individuals, without any real thought about why the University should seek partnerships with particular universities in particular geographical regions. There is no obvious paper which defines the strategy of the University in this respect. Very small numbers of students have benefitted from Erasmus exchanges although there is evident enthusiasm from these students. The University managed the exchanges well and kept in touch with the students while they were away, which is good. Only two students have so far come as Erasmus students to the University – if the University is to expand this activity then it needs to think carefully about a programme that is suitable and challenging for incoming students, who may well not speak Romanian. Students find more and more that they cannot afford a period in another country without further financial support, often from the parents. It would surely be worth seeing if the local region or the local businesses might be willing to offer potential employees some limited support in order that they benefit from an international experience and that they enhance their foreign language skills. The University will also need to consider whether it is sensible to involve an active academic in managing an operation that could easily be undertaken by an administrator. The



University has a good record of inviting visiting professors but again this is small scale and depends on the good will and enthusiasm of a number of champions.

Publishing Activity

The University produces a considerable number of publications year by year for use in teaching. The business is managed by some highly competent staff but there is little evidence, to me at least, that this activity is significantly enhancing the University's research activity. It is labour intensive for disciplines where the curriculum needs to be constantly updated. Teaching material published in monograph form is surely not the way for a modern university to provide texts for its students. There seems to be little awareness of the costs involved in this activity – is this the best way to use highly competent staff? Are they being distracted from other activities? Is anybody thinking about other possible ways of producing this material, for example on the student electronic platform?

The University must surely realize that to become an important research institution its staff must target the best international journals and its staff will have to publish in major languages with international publishers.

Two printing houses rent space adjacent to the publishing arm of the University – this provides useful income, no doubt, and a convenient printing outlet. But is anybody in the University thinking about the future of the printed book when the primary use is pedagogical that needs constant updating?

Quality Assurance

The University has a formal quality assurance system with descriptive manuals and online availability. A Quality Assurance Commission is chaired by the Rector and it meets once a term, approximately, more often if necessary. This structure replicates the structure in the Faculties where the Dean chairs a similar commission. Students are represented on these committees and reports find their way to Senate. Processes include systematic evaluation of teachers although in a meeting with Staff it became clear that Staff were more conscious of their skills or lack of them by presence of the students in class. The system seems to work well even if, as in many Universities, the paperwork and bureaucracy that such a system entails is not appreciated. Staff see it, wrongly, as a necessary burden. There seems to be no way of evaluating the effectiveness of the process – does it work, could it be improved? Staff seem to be so overwhelmed by their workloads that they have little time to think and reflect and the structure of the University does not encourage this kind of staff participation. Top down management may not be the most appropriate management system for a university of this size. Another failure of the system, as far as I could judge, is that while it may pinpoint areas of failure it does not illustrate areas of success where teachers are performing particularly well. I would urge this University to consider developing a policy for enhancement so that good practice is spread across the institution as a matter of routine. With so many cognate disciplines, this should not be difficult.



Student Voices

I had two meetings with students, one to discuss Erasmus exchanges and the other to look more generally at the University as I find the large group exchanges organized with the whole ARACIS team are not conducive to an open exchange of views. Often, students are unwilling to voice their opinions openly. I asked to see a small group but in the event over 20 turned up so I did not have the intimacy of a small group. I have rarely visited a university where the students are so placid and uncritical. Nothing, they say, needs to be done to improve the situation and they seem blissfully unaware of the politics of the real world, the pressure on finance and student numbers, that exists in their vicinity. They say they came to the University because of its reputation and because of its proximity. They appreciate the accessibility of staff, the promptness of feedback, the learning resources, library, IT equipment, teaching rooms. They say that a degree from the University enhances their employment prospects in the local environment. We heard from a meeting with employers that relations with the University are good but that they could be improved by a more proactive approach from senior management, perhaps with a single individual or a team acting as liaison manager – this might not necessarily be an academic but an administrator with a business background who develops links and good relationships, leading to improved employment prospects and the possibility of some sponsorship, more useful student placements etc. Much could be done in this area to build on the work already undertaken.

The students are really not aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. One student alone felt there should be more library books but she shouted down by others who said there were plenty of books. Some students felt that there should be better access to foreign languages so that they could learn a language out of hours – this would not lead to credits but would enhance their employment prospects. That said, the students we met had good English skills, better indeed than some of the staff. The students claimed this is one of the top research universities in the country and when asked said that staff had told them this. This is patently untrue. The University clearly treats its students well and is perhaps over generous in the provision it makes for them.

Career Orientation

This is a very small scale operation and is, again, efficiently run by a busy academic rather than a dedicated administrator. Students are encouraged to plan their career at an early point in their studies. Each faculty has a particular individual responsible for careers information. The service involves arranging visits from employers, inviting alumni back to the university to describe potential careers, and offering individual advice. The service could, if finances permitted, be expanded and professionalized so that students could be given much more practical support in their search for employment in suitable sectors. Some good ideas are emerging – working with the local employment agency to match local demands with suitable students; building up a database of alumni so that they become a real resource on which the university could count for support



in a manner of ways. Investment is needed in this area if the University is going to be able to offer students the support they need to find suitable employment.

Staff Voices

I requested a meeting with 4-5 staff appointed in the last 5 years. The request got confused and misunderstood with the result that all staff were asked to attend a meeting with the entire ARACIS team. My small group became a lecture theatre with about 50 people present, even though an attempt was made to correct the wrong information. So I had a much bigger group of staff present than I anticipated. One obvious result was that staff did not feel at ease to speak openly and critically of their institution – the atmosphere was friendly as staff generally know each other. But there was a lack of frankness and openness – and this was a feature throughout the visit. One felt on occasion that there was a veil between the team and the truth and it was impossible to pierce the veil to get at the reality behind. Staff, like the students, do not seem to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their institution – they claim it is a top research institution but it clearly is not and will never be unless drastic changes are introduced. Staff have extremely heavy teaching loads, far more than national or European norms, and they carry heavy administrative loads. This is not the profile of a research university. There are no central funds to support research activity, no money for pump-priming or innovation – so that research competes, especially for younger staff, for funds from the domestic budget. They pay for conference attendance themselves and many important events are beyond their reach. They are stuck in the local environment where they perform a good teaching role. But it is hard to see, given the present management and structures of the University, how this will ever change. Embryonic plans exist to raise funds from sponsors but this is just an idea for the moment. Staff complained about the bureaucracy that invades their daily lives but recognized that this is a symptom not just of their university but of their national environment. There seems to be no formal induction for staff joining the university, no continuous staff development in the University for training and upskilling. Many staff are unhappy and frustrated but do not have the platform to vent their anger. They have many ideas that could be tapped but there is no obvious forum in the present structures where their voices can be heard. The University does not seem to have an agreed democratic structure. This is clearly not an ideal situation.


Conclusions

While this is clearly a university that performs its teaching mission in an effective manner, with satisfied, if complacent, students, I have rarely come across an institution that is so unaware of its strengths and weaknesses. The self-evaluation document and the SWOT analysis is a striking example of this. The University thinks it has a leading research status but this is not apparent to me. Unless structures change radically the University will never be anything other than a good regional institution undertaking a solid teaching mission. Regions need universities like this to train the future generation of employees. But they do not all need to be top class research institutions. Far too much mundane administration is undertaken by academics which, in a small institution, is going



to stifle ambition and innovation. The University desperately needs new blood, new ideas, new strategic thinking, perhaps new structures to take it into a new environment. Given its limited resources and its overworked staff, it will never be able to make the kind of leap forward that a top research institution would require. I am confident that it treats its students well – but who is the guarantor of academic standards, who assesses the quality of student performance on a regular basis. There is a great temptation in private universities to ensure that their students achieve degree status, since it is their business mission. Do they make sufficient use of external expertise? And how can a university be allowed to continue with confidence if the large number of students it has is taught by so few staff – this is dangerous and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. I believe therefore, given the evidence that was presented to us, that the University can be allowed to proceed with some confidence – but this confidence is marginal and unless changes are made quickly to improve the staff-student ratios, the University will not be able to fulfill its teaching mission in a satisfactory manner, no matter how dedicated the staff may be nor how good the physical appearance of the University may be.

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