

Report of External Assessor for review of

## TITU MAOIRESCU UNIVERSITY

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### Introduction

This report forms part of an external assessment of Titu Maiorescu University (TMU) conducted, at the request of TMU, under the auspices of the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ARACIS). The report is based on information provided in an institutional self-evaluation analysis, perusal of the TMU website and from intelligence gained during a site visit to TMU from 8-11th May 2012.

During the site visit, I held individual meetings with the Rector, President, Pro-Rector, Vice-President, Chair of Senate, several Deans, President of Student Union and participated in general meetings with representative groups of faculty, students and alumni. These diverse interactions provided opportunity to gain an overall perspective of the University and the institutional commitment to quality and pursuit of academic excellence. The senior management team is clearly committed to the advancement of TMU and demonstrated excellent vision, appropriate strategies and ambition for the university,

It should be noted that I did not examine student theses, review examination papers or curricular content and, therefore, must rely on disciplinary experts on the review panel to comment on the academic rigour of various programmes.

The review process was facilitated greatly by the full cooperation received from Rector Smaranda Angheni and her colleagues. Their willingness to discuss all facets of the operation in an open, frank manner was much appreciated. The utility and effectiveness of the visit was enhanced also by the efforts of Ms Joana Panc who coordinated meetings, responded to all requests and served as an excellent translator in all interactions. Finally I am pleased to acknowledge the work of Ms Doina Stanciu who coordinated all travel, accommodation and logistical arrangements associated with the visit.

### Background and Context

TMU was founded in 1990 and, as a relatively young, private University, has had to confront the inevitable challenges associated with gaining acceptance and recognition within the higher education establishment. TMU complies fully with the requirements of national legislation concerning higher education but

suffers from the erroneous public perception that private universities are of lesser quality than state institutions. Such perceptions impede efforts to attract top class students and faculty. The performance of TMU graduates in such disciplines as Psychology and Law belies this false impression and every effort should be made to celebrate and promote the excellent facilities and achievements of TMU.

In many jurisdictions, private universities are afforded freedom to pursue innovative approaches to pedagogy and curriculum which are not possible within the more rigid legislative structures imposed on state institutions. Such freedom does not mean any relaxation of academic standards but, rather, allows for innovation within the higher education system and has enabled development of such outstanding institutions as Stanford and Caltech in the United States.

### **Commendations**

- *TMU has developed splendidly during its relatively short life and may be considered as a worthy component of the Romanian higher education landscape.*
- *TMU graduates have assumed prominent positions in both the public and private sectors and are clearly competitive with graduates of state institutions.*

### **Recommendations**

- *TMU should make every effort to advertise its excellent facilities, the achievements of its alumni and to overcome misperceptions about the quality of private universities.*
- *Government should recognise the opportunity afforded by the private university sector to develop innovative approaches to higher education. Institutions seeking to avail of such opportunity should be required to submit detailed proposals to the government for approval and should demonstrate that academic standards will not be compromised.*

### **Quality**

A key responsibility for the international assessor is to ensure that the University satisfies all criteria for quality assurance identified by the European Association for Quality Assurance. An institutional commitment to quality requires that the following conditions are satisfied:

- There is a clearly described quality assurance (QA) process which is readily available to and understood by all members of the community;
- There is a schedule which provides for external reviews of all academic and administrative units at least every five years;
- There are annual internal reviews of teaching, learning and research performance;
- The results of all external evaluations are available to the entire community;

- Effective, demonstrable action is taken on recommendations emanating from evaluations and that these are reported annually.

Discussions with Vice-President Valentin Pau indicate that TMU is in full compliance with the EU guidelines and, indeed, go well beyond the minimum requirements.

At TMU, the QA process involves five components, some of which are undertaken each semester and some annually. Each faculty member receives an annual assessment of his/her performance with remedial actions taken to improve those whose performance is considered unsatisfactory. The TMU process for QA involves:

- Annual self-evaluation by faculty comprising complete listing of all academic activity and contributions;
- Student evaluation conducted anonymously each semester; this evaluation addresses course content and relevance, pedagogy, use of technology, accessibility and relationship with students; the assessments are evaluated by a Faculty board and ranked on a five-point scale ranging from poor to excellent.
- Peer assessment conducted within each department with consideration given to teaching, research, administration, and professional service (boards, committees, editorial responsibilities and cooperation)
- Alumni are consulted to determine the utility of individual teachers and academic programmes to their careers
- Contact is maintained with a cross section of current and potential employers of TMU graduates to ensure that academic offerings and the skill set of graduates are consistent with current market demand.

### **Commendation**

- *TMU has developed an effective programme and instruments for QA which is understood and appreciated by faculty and students.*

### **Recommendations**

- *Budgetary constraints make it difficult to provide adequate reward for outstanding performance yet appropriate recognition and celebration of achievement is clearly useful in providing incentive for continuous improvement. TMU should consider introduction of annual awards for excellence in teaching and excellence in research. The awards need not be of substantial financial value but should be presented in a public forum such as the annual graduation ceremony. Such token recognition would emphasise the institutional commitment to excellence.*
- *In most universities, it is generally accepted that all faculty should excel in teaching, research and administration. However, some excellent teachers are not good researchers and conversely some outstanding researchers are not good teachers. TMU should accommodate this reality in its assessment of faculty performance and, in assignment of*

*responsibilities, endeavour to deploy human resources in a manner that makes optimal use of faculty interests and abilities.*

## **Teaching**

Discussions with Vice-Rector Gheorghiu indicate that TMU places strong emphasis on teaching excellence.

Newly recruited faculty are required to participate in teacher education courses and it is planned to introduce a requirement that each teacher will complete a masters qualification in teaching. A mentor system is also in operation with junior faculty assigned to a more senior member of staff who is available to counsel and assist in career development.

Every effort is made to ensure that class sizes are small with an average of 10-15 students per class in medicine and dental medicine and a class size of no more than 25 students in other disciplines. Tutorials are used to complement traditional lectures and all course offerings are available to students on line.

TMU also recognises the importance of helping students acquire the "soft skills" that employers seek including team work, leadership, communication and inter-personal skills. The students' marketability is enhanced further by the requirement that all students must demonstrate competence in a second language.

### ***Commendation***

- *TMU recognises learning as the primary mission of the University and has developed appropriate strategies and supports to deliver an optimal learning environment.*

### ***Recommendation***

- *As a private University, TMU should be encouraged to consider trying innovations in pedagogy such as a more student-centred approach to education with greater flexibility in the length and scope of course offerings; however, it is recognised that such initiatives must gain approval of higher authorities in order to maintain full accreditation status.*

## **Research**

The discovery, assimilation and promulgation of new knowledge are essential components in the mandate of the modern university. TMU recognises this responsibility and emphasises research performance as a vital element in the assessment of faculty. Nine research centres have been established around critical masses of research expertise and collaborations with national and international research groups have been formed. Doctoral programmes are offered in some disciplines and EU funds have been obtained to support

specific research initiatives. Annual conferences and production of disciplinary journals serve to emphasise the institutional commitment to research and help to create a research ethos within the university. Ready access to on-line data bases facilitates the research process. However, it must be recognised that in some disciplines such as medicine, research is expensive requiring access to sophisticated equipment and, in such areas, collaboration with other institutions is necessary.

### **Commendation**

- *It is difficult for a young university with young faculty and few established research stars to achieve a high, internationally recognised research profile; thus TMU should be congratulated for its efforts to date and for emphasising research as an institutional priority.*

### **Recommendation**

- *It is not possible for any university, especially a young institution, to excel in every field of academic endeavour; thus, TMU should identify one or two areas in which it can aspire to develop an internationally acclaimed centre of research excellence and allocate available resources to such development through recruitment of world class faculty and post-graduate students; creation of such a centre will enhance the standing of TMU internationally and allow future expansion of research in other disciplines.*

### **Infrastructure**

As a result of prudent financial management, TMU has developed outstanding infrastructure which enhances the working environment of faculty, staff and students. The university boasts a modern 700-seat amphitheatre, modern lecture rooms, classrooms and office space of the highest quality. The equipment and facilities available for the training of students of dental medicine are superior to those seen by this reviewer in other Romanian universities.

A recent major investment in information technology has equipped TMU with an excellent IT infrastructure which satisfies admirably the teaching, research and administrative needs of a modern university.

### **Commendation**

- *TMU has managed its limited resources prudently to provide students, staff and faculty with excellent infrastructure in which to pursue the academic mission.*

### **Recommendation**

- *As a private university, TMU is highly dependent on student fees to cover annual operating expenses, purchase of major equipment and to*



*enable initiation and implementation of capital projects; every effort should be made to develop additional revenue streams through such avenues as private philanthropy, corporate donations, overhead on research grants and contracts and commercial activities – eg. rental of amphitheatre and medical tourism; the upcoming silver anniversary of the founding of TMU could represent opportunity for a major fund-raising initiative.*

### **The Student Experience**

Representatives of the student body and alumni expressed considerable pride in and loyalty towards TMU. Students are strongly motivated to ensure that academic programmes and assessment procedures are of the highest possible standard. They spoke positively about their relationship with faculty, indicated satisfaction with support structures and felt that they are partners with faculty in the educational process. The overall impression is of a group of students who, possibly because they are paying for their education, are diligent and strongly committed to academic excellence and attainment of academic goals.

However, it is important to recognise that the University experience should embrace more than academic study. University is an opportunity to explore and develop extra-curricular interests and develop social skills. The absence of student clubs, teams and societies at TMU deprives students of such opportunity and the situation is exacerbated by the fact that most TMU students live at home and leave campus at the end of classes. Plans are in place to address this deficit in the student experience by establishing a student club with a debating society and a drama and talent society. A recent initiative by the Department of Counselling and Career Services involves a summer camp at which students spend a week together participating in group activities and developing teamwork and interpersonal skills but, unfortunately, limited resources prevent many students from participating in this excellent programme.

#### **Commendation**

- *TMU students are strongly motivated towards academic achievement and demand high standards of themselves and their teachers.*

#### **Recommendation**

- *TMU should proceed with plans to develop the proposed student club and recognise the importance of extra curricular activities in enhancing the overall student experience.*

### **Student Counselling and Career Services**

Universities provide students with advanced knowledge and practical experience of their chosen discipline, together with a capacity for critical analysis and original thought. In addition, Universities must recognise the

expectation of students that their investment in higher education will enable them to graduate and obtain gainful employment. The Department of Student Counselling and Career Services at TMU facilitates greatly the fulfilment of this ambition.

The Department assists students who are physically disadvantaged and offers counselling to students with academic, emotional or personal problems. The Department also helps students in developing CVs, good interview skills and the softer skills, such as teamwork, leadership and problem solving which are demanded by potential employers. A particularly worthy initiative was a recent workshop on entrepreneurship which provided students with information on starting and running a business. The success of the workshop is evidenced by the fact that 40 students are now involved in their own start up companies.

### **Commendation**

- *The Department of Student Counselling and Career Services offers an outstanding programme of services and workshops which add considerable value to the student experience and the overall quality of TMU graduates.*

### **Recommendation**

- *The resources available to operate the Department are not sufficient to enable the services to be provided to the entire student body; although the financial constraints under which TMU currently functions are fully recognised, the work of the Department should be assigned high priority in the allocation of resources; it may be possible also to use the voluntary assistance of faculty and alumni in the delivery of some programmes.*

### **Conclusions**

TMU has developed splendidly during the first 22 years of its existence and has potential to become an outstanding private university. It produces excellent graduates and its alumni occupy prominent positions in both public and private sectors. In spite of prudent financial management, the university suffers from financial constraints resulting from heavy dependence on student fees for operating income and efforts should be made to generate additional revenue streams. An additional impediment to institutional advancement is the misperception that, as a private university, the academic offerings of TMU are of lesser quality than those of state institutions. The successes of TMU graduates belie this false impression and the university should advertise and celebrate its achievements to a greater extent.



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