



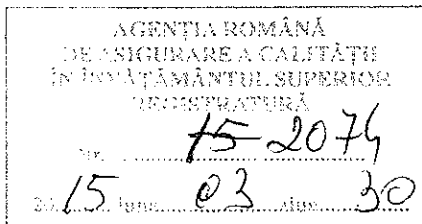
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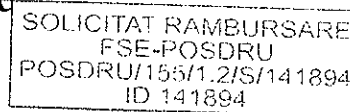
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REPORT of the foreign evaluator for the University Petru Maior



Executive Summary

This is the report of the international expert member of the external evaluation of Petru Maior Targu Mares in March 2015.

After a brief introduction the report begins by describing the organisation of the visit by the evaluation team and the role of the external expert. It then offers some comments on the university's strategic planning, its teaching and learning, its research, its international relations, and finally its regional strategy. Each of these sections contains some recommendations for action. The report suggests the development of an explicit Regional Strategy to integrate the different strategies of the university and ensure it develops a distinctive profile.

Introduction

I was the international expert member of the external evaluation of Petru Maior University in Targu Mares organised by ARACIS, the Romanian Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. I participated in the visit of the evaluation team to Petru Maior University from Thursday 5 March 2015 to Saturday 7 March 2015. I arrived in Targu-Mares on Wednesday evening and departed for Dublin on Sunday 8 March 2015. I was met at the airport by the Rector Professor Calin Enachescu. I would like to record my gratitude to Professor Enachescu, the administrative director Mr. Radu Boarescu and the Vice-rector Professor Liviu Moldovan for their hospitality and their care in making all the arrangements for my visit. During all my time in the university very efficient translation was provided by doctoral student Ms. Veronica Zaharagiu to whom I am extremely grateful.

The work of the evaluation team was greatly helped by the hospitality and openness of the management and staff of the university. Such an external evaluation is necessarily time-consuming and disruptive for colleagues of the institution which is being reviewed. Nonetheless, the colleagues of the university of Petru Maior facilitated the team with good humour and patience. I personally held meetings and discussions with administrative staff and faculty members which were often organised at very short notice. I would like to record my own thanks to the university management team for facilitating this. In particular I wish to thank the individual faculty members for their patience with an outsider's naïve questions about their work. Many colleagues also participated in a series of lively and valuable group discussions. I do hope that this re-accreditation was not experienced as inquisitorial investigation but a useful stimulus for self-reflection and further improvement. If this was the case, it is largely thanks to the staff of the university of Petru Maior themselves.



Organisation of the visit

At the start of the visit the evaluation team were greeted by the university management and shown the university main campus and facilities. There were also three well-attended public meetings between the team and university graduates, employers of students and finally current students. These three meetings were very informative; in particular the two student members of the team posed useful questions to the three different groups. The visit concluded with a final meeting with university management.

Apart from these meetings there were no scheduled discussions within the team nor any further meetings between the team as a whole and individual members of the university. Neither the team chair nor the ARACIS representative made any attempt to formulate issues on which we could focus. There was never any discussion within the team highlighting issues where we needed further information or indeed identifying areas of excellence. This was a very different approach to any evaluation or re-accreditation in which I have participated as a member of a team and also very different to the organisation of any similar external review at my own university. A more effective accreditation would require the team to assess *and discuss* the different aspects of the institution under review.

Before my visit I was provided with English language translations of ARACIS procedures and basic policy documents. I also received in English the university's Self-Evaluation Report from 2015 which was prepared for this re-accreditation. This mainly documents quality assurance procedures and provides some basic information. It references a multitude of appendices none of which however were made available in English. I was also sent a copy of the university's strategic plan 2013-2016 but unfortunately no English translation was provided. Although the ARACIS documentation states that training will be provided to re-accreditation teams this did not occur. Beyond the rather limited information available on the ARACIS website I received no briefing as to the re-accreditation procedure in general or what was expected from myself as foreign expert. Again this is very different to any other such re-accreditation in which I have participated.

While at the university I was provided with the Self-Evaluation Report prepared in November 2013. Along with its appendices this report contained much useful information on the structure and activities of the university. It also included an Executive Summary of the university's Strategic Plan for Development 2013-2016. While the Self-Evaluation report of 2015 is largely concerned to document the university's procedures, the November 2013 Report is a substantive self-evaluation, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the university and reflecting carefully upon its position.

With the help in particular of the Vice-Rector I was able to meet with professors and staff in all three faculties of the university. In the Faculty of Sciences and Letters I met with the Faculty management and later with the staff with the department of History and International Relations; in the Faculty of Engineering I met with individual professors and staff as well as with the head of the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management. In both these Faculties I was able to observe a few classes and lectures in progress, and I would like to record thanks to the colleagues for allowing this intrusion. During the afternoon of March 6th I visited the Faculty of Economics, Law and Administrative Sciences in its new building located some distance from the main campus. There I met with the Faculty management and then held an open discussion with staff from the entire Faculty. On the main campus I met separately with the Vice Rector for Research to discuss research. This role is also responsible for International Relations which we discussed together with the Head of the European Programmes Office. Finally I had a full meeting with the Vice-Rector for Teaching.

This report is therefore based on rather limited information. Furthermore it was not possible to examine in any meaningful way some important areas of the university, in particular the Centre for Continuing Education, the Department of Part-time Learning and the Department for



Teacher Education. Note that I also do not discuss the university's budgeting system and overall finances.

Recommendation:

Future re-accreditation visits follow a more structured and team-based approach.

The University's strategic plan and the planning process

The university's slogan or mission statement is 'A University for the Community'. This is at the forefront of the university's Strategic Plan 2013-2016. It is not an empty slogan but clearly informs the entire strategic planning of the university. It is also understood and supported by the university staff. In meetings staff made clear that for them the mission of the university was to contribute through teaching and research to the regional community. For them, this was interwoven with another defining characteristic of the university, its relatively small size and the resulting close relationship between staff and students. University staff appear to share a vision of a university that is locally relevant and locally rooted, but at the same time open to the world and aiming for national and indeed international excellence. This shared belief was most impressive. In my experience it is quite unusual for the staff of a university to have such a clear commitment to a common vision of what defines their particular university. This commitment is an important achievement which bodes well for the future.

According to the university's documentation the overall strategic plan is reviewed annually and operationalised in annual plans at faculty and departmental levels. The process of annual reviews seems to be very effective in terms of maintaining quality and ensuring continuous improvement of teaching and research. However, it is unclear whether these reviews connect to the overall strategic direction of the university. Interestingly while staff were very clear about the basic mission of the university, most of them stated they were unaware of the strategic plan itself. It was not clear how much the Teaching and Research 'Councils' of the university contributed to the development of anything like a teaching or research strategy.

Recommendation:

The next Strategic Plan should focus more clearly on the specific mission of the university and identify clear objectives for (a) Teaching and Learning (b) Research.

Teaching and Learning

The university's teaching programme is fully compatible with the Bologna system. In all three faculties there are programmes at bachelors and masters level; in the Faculty of Sciences and Letters there is also a doctoral programme. The masters appears to be the normal terminal degree, so that most students go directly from completing the undergraduate (Bachelors) programme to a masters programme. This of course is not the original intention of the Bologna system but has become the norm in many European countries. Indeed, in some institutions in other countries the masters has become simply an extension of an undergraduate programme so that the old 'Diplom' type qualification has been resurrected under another name. Importantly this has not been allowed to happen in Petru Maior and indeed students often join the university in order to study for a masters degree having taken their bachelors degree elsewhere. In other words, the two levels (bachelors and masters) have remained distinct programmes and this is to be welcomed.

The university has an individual tutor system for each year and subject. The tutor acts as academic counsellor as well as personal advisor. All students thus have a tutor with whom they can discuss their progress. This system seems to work well and is much appreciated by students. Importantly all staff participate in the system and it is one of the ways in which the university





ensures that all staff are involved with the students. More generally across the entire university the commitment of staff to the students was quite striking – it is something which is often lacking at other allegedly more prestigious universities. Equally, the close relationship between the students and the entire academic staff (including full professors) was highly valued by students. It is clearly part of the reputation of the university. Significantly in the open meetings this closeness was praised by current students and crucially also by graduates.

Students also have access to a career counselling service. This supplements but has not replaced the commitment of staff to student development. An alumni association was created in 2012 and this keeps graduates in touch with the university. Staff maintain contact with their students after they graduate and this is an important information channel by which they are develop knowledge of the regional community and its needs.

The practical element of education is stressed and the university has developed various forms of placement and internship as well as collaborative research with enterprises for masters dissertations. Importantly this practical aspect of education occurs in all three faculties although is most developed in the Faculty of Engineering where it is also most closely linked to research. Students, graduates and employers all identified this as a key and most valuable aspect of the university's programmes.

There are effective formal procedures in place to annually review and bench mark courses. According to Romanian legislation new programmes require approval through ARACIS and this requires comparison of the proposed content with existing programmes. Furthermore there are national mandatory requirements of the content of first degree programmes. Clearly these regulations are intended to ensure that first degrees deliver a basic level of competence and knowledge in a discipline. However, these regulations are experienced as limiting innovation. They probably restrict university autonomy more than is normal in other countries. They are a particular problem for university like Petru Maior. When a university is not only small in size but also has small departments, it can make the best use of its staff by offering inter-disciplinary and even inter-faculty degrees (business and engineering being an obvious example). Indeed, such innovative and distinctive inter-disciplinary programmes can give a university a national or even international profile. It seems that current regulations not only hinder innovation within existing programmes but make it difficult for the university to develop programmes which would make the best use of its potential.

The documentation provided to students for all courses is clear and exemplary. The course content, teaching method and evaluation are all clearly stated. No concerns were raised by students that evaluation is arbitrary or in any way unfair. Different forms of assessment (exam, oral discussion etc.) are appropriately employed. However, although the overall distribution of marks is checked at department and faculty level it seems to be the case that students' work is only marked once, with no 'second marking' system. In other words the mark is entirely the responsibility of the individual lecturer / teaching assistant. Equally there appears to be no external validation of students' marks at programme level. While no concerns were raised by staff or students about these issues, the lack of any internal second marking and of any external validation are serious deficits. Such checks ensure marking is consistent and transparent; they also help keep course content and teaching methodology up to date.

Students are allowed to re-take examinations in order to achieve a higher grade. Since however such re-takes cannot result in a lower grade this may have the undesirable consequence that students spread their work over a longer period than is desirable.

Petru Maior has procedures, some of which are mandated by ARACIS, which contribute to the continuous improvement of the teaching. There are workshops at faculty and department level on teaching methodology as well as annual 'round table' meetings within departments. Through international exchanges staff participate in current third level teaching developments across Europe. Every semester students complete an evaluation of the teaching of all their



courses. The results of this evaluation are discussed by the head of department with the individual lecturer. This student evaluation is simple, well organised and well embedded in the university. It clearly functions to maintain basic standards and ensure transparency. However there are concerns about students' low participation rate and it may well be that students do not consider that their evaluations have any consequences. It would be important to consider mechanisms that 'close the feedback loop' such as 'You said, we did' announcements which tell students the response to their views. It might also be desirable to make some results (perhaps even just participation rates) public even though there are well-known risks here of creating a spurious popularity contest.

Such a student evaluation system is an important check on lecturers' performance but it should not be confused with the active involvement of students in their own learning; it is clearly inadequate as a mechanism for student feed-back and discussion. Several individual lecturers have therefore created their own ad hoc surveys to provide a channel for their students' views.

Teaching facilities such as classrooms and laboratories are at least adequate and the more recent ones are of high standard. However, it was noticeable that teaching and learning space including the newest lecture rooms are configured for transmission of knowledge from the lecturer to the students and study space is configured only for individual learning. Thus it is not possible to easily re-configure the lecture halls or even the class rooms for group discussion; there appear to be no dedicated group study spaces such as are increasingly provided elsewhere by university libraries. Although most classrooms are well equipped with audio-visual equipment and there are some really excellent facilities for remote learning there seems to be little systematic development of any Virtual Learning Environment whether shareware (e.g. Moodle) or commercially provided (e.g. Blackboard Learn).

Teaching at all levels is quite interactive and lively in style and involves practical and project work; forms of learning and forms of assessment are quite variable and carefully planned. However, on the basis of rather limited information I would suggest that students perhaps see university education as a relatively top-down process and that staff tend to see interactive teaching largely as a more efficient way to transmit information. Both students and staff seem to regard university learning as largely directed by staff and indeed occurring in a controlled environment. Students seem to have relatively little time for independent and self-directed study. University education should however be also or even primarily the development of the student's competences and capabilities. The university could examine its teaching methodology in this light.

As the Self-Evaluation makes clear Petru Maior only has a doctoral programme in the Faculty of Sciences and Letters. The university is quite rightly concerned that there are relatively few staff permitted to act as doctoral supervisors although there is some additional doctoral supervision through collaboration with other universities. Nonetheless the small number of research postgraduates is a major brake on the university's ambitions. Doctoral students not only consolidate a university's research but when working as teaching assistants drive up the level of undergraduate and master's teaching. In engineering the university has an established teaching tradition and its applied research here is now also well established; it is rapidly developing teaching and research in business administration. Consolidating and advancing these achievements now requires dedicated doctoral programmes.



Recommendations:

High level recommendation – the university should develop its teaching and learning to further encourage students' autonomy and self-direction.

Develop inter-disciplinary and inter-faculty degree programmes to make more effective use of staff expertise.

Introduce within departments a second marker system to validate course level assessment; consider introducing external validation of programme results.

Explore forms of student feed-back at course level that go beyond students simply evaluating lecturers; ensure students are informed about the results of their evaluations.

Explore re-configuring teaching and library space to facilitate group work and group discussion (see high level recommendation above).

Expand and standardise Virtual Learning Environment.

Develop small doctoral programmes in the Faculties of Engineering and Economics.

Research

The research strategy of the university is one component of the four year strategic plan. At department level the strategy is reviewed annually. Within departments there are Research Centres comprising at least two research teams; a Centre has to be accredited by the university's Scientific Council and receives institutional support. Research output is carefully monitored and documented; research output feeds into the individual staff annual review.

On the basis of the information available to me in English it was only possible to form a limited view of the university's research progress. It does appear that overall all academic staff achieve a minimum level of research activity as indexed through scientific publication. Importantly research is one component of each staff member's annual review. According to the documentation the quality and quantity of publications is increasing but it was not possible to independently verify this. Conventional metrics such as Google Scholar suggest that most staff members have rather low citation counts but also identify several staff members with the level of citation counts that one might expect at a good regional university. Such metrics are however notoriously problematic for non-Anglophone scholars and may give an unfairly negative assessment of some colleagues' research output.

The university has significant research successes. In the faculty of engineering there is much applied research in collaboration with local enterprises ranging from local SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) to international companies located in the region. There has been some involvement in European research and teaching-related projects and indeed the university has co-ordinated a COST action. This is a considerable achievement.

The university pursues essentially a 'bottom-up' approach to research strategy in which research is monitored but not directed: 'Our policy is to leave the research centres to plan their own research activities. The research output is constantly monitored' (Self Evaluation Report 2013, p. 14).

Such monitoring identifies areas that are not performing to their full potential. The university clearly has a very positive research culture which encourages all staff to be engage in research, but it is not clear how much formal and informal encouragement and mentoring staff receive. There is apparently no system of sabbatical or research leave since this would conflict with national regulations governing the mandatory teaching obligations of staff. While the





involvement of all staff in both teaching and research is clearly most valuable and the university must ensure that this continues, it also needs to recognise that a higher research profile will require more dedicated research time. Some system of leave is essential to ensure that staff are not simply swamped by teaching and administrative commitments. Developing such a system of research leave should be a key responsibility for the Vice-Rector for Research.

Currently the research strategy essentially monitors research output. There is an understandable reluctance to actually direct research into particular areas since notoriously this can undermine creativity and at its worst threaten academic freedom. However the current laissez-faire approach has severe drawbacks. The reluctance to highlight areas of strength means that the university's profile is lower than it should be and opportunities for the university to have a distinctive niche go unexplored. There is a risk that possible connections between research and teaching are almost accidental and not as developed as they could be. For example, the university's teaching is clearly distinctive for its practice-based orientation (see above) and it is noticeable that several international research projects (e.g. several COST actions) explicitly address the connection between research, knowledge transfer and teaching. There is clearly the opportunity here for the university to develop an international presence but this requires direction and encouragement (not least in terms of resources).

Recommendations:

Develop a research strategy that identifies key research areas as well as documenting research output.

Introduce a system of research leave or reduced teaching load for highly productive researchers.

International relations

The university has extensive international exchanges through Erasmus (now Erasmus+) and CEEPUS. There has recently been some rationalisation of these exchanges in order to develop a more strategic and focused approach. Student participation in exchanges is actively promoted by staff. The actual participation rate is however well below 10% which is disappointing. In the past take up has been limited by the relatively low value of student bursaries although it is hoped that a recent increase in payments will change this. Certainly those students who have participated in exchanges value the experience. Exchanges appear well organised and significantly there appear to have been no problems with the mutual recognition of credits (this is a common problem in other less well organised universities). The students have requested that Erasmus exchanges be available in the first year of studies but quite rightly this has been rejected by the university: an exchange in the first year hardly constitutes an exchange between universities.

An obvious challenge has been to attract international students to Petru Maior. The university already makes commendable efforts here in terms of publicity etc. However, there seems to be no clear policy either to facilitate incoming students who wish to study in Romanian (i.e. follow the normal Erasmus exchange system) or to develop – as many European universities are doing – specific courses taught to all students in English. Immediately there are probably opportunities here in both Business and History at undergraduate level. Given the university's excellent staff student relations, its high quality teaching and last, not but not least, its scenic location there are in fact quite remarkable opportunities for the university to become an extremely attractive destination for international students. This could in turn have benefits for the rest of the university. Indeed, it is not too fanciful to imagine Targu Mures as a university town with an international reputation like that of Maastricht!



The university has extensive connections with other European universities. Importantly, student exchanges have also been linked to teaching exchanges and to curricular development. To some extent exchanges have also facilitated collaborative research. However, once again this appears to be largely a 'bottom up' development dependent on the interests and initiatives of individual staff members. International exchanges have not been used systematically to develop research strengths and teaching innovation. In all three faculties it might be possible to develop various forms of joint masters courses linking with other universities across Europe with similar interests (e.g. regional governance, certain areas of industrial engineering...).

The European Programs Office appears to be quite effective in supporting such connections. Its work would however be greatly helped by a clear university strategy prioritising particular links and integrating them into the teaching, research and regional contribution strategies.

Recommendations:

Link exchanges more explicitly to areas of teaching and research strength to strengthen the university's international profile.

Consider the introduction of an international programme taught through English to give the university a distinctive international profile.

Regional involvement

The mission statement of 'a university for the community' clearly indicates the close involvement between the university and the region. In one sense the university is a local university – most staff and most students are from the region. At the same time, regional involvement is not confused with localism – the university has very significant international links, its teaching and research fully participate in European and international developments.

Research in the Engineering and Economics faculties appears more closely linked to local and regional activities than research in the Science and Letters Faculty. This is quite normal but there are probably opportunities for greater involvement by the humanities in local and regional cultural life.

There are close connections between the university and local enterprises. For some SMEs the Faculty of Engineering provides useful access to facilities (e.g. CAD/CAM software) which they would otherwise not have. Departments in the Engineering Faculty work with local enterprises in process innovation. At the same time links to large multinational firms located in the region provide opportunities for shared research using these firms' facilities. Within regional industry the university thus appears to be an important component of the (regional) innovation system. Local employers seem to hold the education received by graduates in high regard and they too stressed its practical relevance. Especially at masters level it has been possible for the university to design courses which fit employers' needs and there is input by local employers into curriculum planning. It is noticeable that this involvement with local enterprises is not restricted to engineering but ranges from cultural institutions to the important local tourist industry. There is also some student involvement in local charities.

Given that so many students remain in the region, regional involvement is also strengthened by the alumni association (see above). Links with alumni are one way in which local employers and professional associations maintain informal communication with the university. Through such links graduates often gain employment and university staff are aware of the needs of local enterprises. Such links thus ensure the employability of the university's graduates and so strengthen its contribution to the region. However, there seems to be relatively little involvement with regional government.



Given the importance of the regional contribution to the university's mission, this should now be formalised as a 'third mission' parallel to teaching and research. An explicit regional strategy would begin by documenting the multiple the connections that exist. Although some new activities should be developed, the regional strategy would essentially integrate existing activities. In particular it would ensure that teaching and research as the two key missions of the university all focus on their regional contribution. The Rector is responsible for the overall direction of the university and the implementation of the Strategic Plan. Since the regional strategy would be an integrative strategy, rather a distinct set of activities, it should be the direct responsibility of the Rector.

Recommendation:

Develop an explicit regional (or 'community') strategy led by the Rector to identify the multiple ways in which the university can contribute to the region. The strategy would provide the focus for the different activities of the university.

Conclusion

Petru Maior's mission statement defines it as 'a university for the community'. This is a defining feature of the university. Much of the research and policy literature on universities' regional contribution has tended to focus on elite research intensive universities and high tech regions (e.g. Route 128 in Boston USA, 'Silicon Fen' in Cambridge UK etc.) (Uyarra 2010). It is however clear that less highly profiled higher educational institutions can make a significant regional contribution. Much more is involved here than simple 'knowledge transfer' and the training of qualified labour. Thus Petru Maior is an important part of the local innovation ecosystem and it already contributes to the social and cultural life of the region.

The future development of the university can build on a firm foundation. The university has well organised and practice-oriented teaching with a good staff student ratio, a strong research culture and relevant international links. It also has very committed staff and effective processes of staff review. The university leadership has a realistic appreciation of the institution's strengths and weaknesses. The challenge now is to realise the university's potential to make a greater and clearer contribution to the community. This will require a more strategic approach to both teaching and research but above all it will require a regional strategy to deliver an overall direction to the work of the university.

Reference:

Uyarra, Elvira (2010). 'Conceptualising the regional roles of universities, implications and contradictions'. *European Planning Studies* 18.8: 1227-1246

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30 March 2015

Date: 30 March 2015

ETS – FOREIGN EVALUATOR EXPERT

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