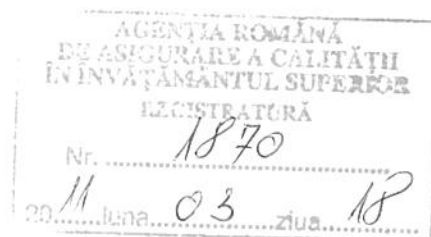


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Ms. Oana Sarbu.

Dear Oana.

Please find attached a statement of expenses incurred as a result of my recent visit to the University of Oradea and two copies of my evaluation report. I forwarded an electronic version of the report to your attention on Monday 7th March 2011.

Thank you again for your valued assistance throughout the process.

With warm regards,

Roger 

Review of the
UNIVERSITY OF ORADEA
Report of External Examiner
Professor Roger G H Downer
President Emeritus, University of Limerick
March 2011

INTRODUCTION

This report forms part of an external assessment of the University of Oradea (UO) commissioned by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ARACIS). The report is based on information contained in an institutional self-evaluation report prepared by UO, perusal of the UO website and from intelligence and impressions gained during a site visit to UO during 1-4 March 2011.

Whereas other members of the review panel assumed responsibility for assessment of specific academic disciplines, the role of this reviewer was to obtain an overall perspective of the University and the institutional commitment to quality. In this regard, it is relevant to note that an earlier ARACIS review of UO, conducted in May 2007, identified concerns relating to administrative and academic practices at UO. Thus, an underlying objective in the present review was to determine if UO has addressed adequately, the issues raised in the previous review.

DETAILS OF SITE VISIT

During the site visit, meetings were requested with a number of individuals and groups including the Rector, Vice-Rectors, Deans, Heads of Department, representatives of staff and students and the Directors of such essential services as Library, IT, Careers Guidance and Distance Education.. It is encouraging to report that the overriding theme emerging from these meetings was one of intense loyalty and ambition for UO. All those interviewed responded openly and frankly to specific questions and expressed confidence in the current institutional leadership.

The utility of the site visit was facilitated greatly by the willingness of all members of the University community to respond promptly to requests for meetings and information and, in this regard, special appreciation is extended to Ms Carmen Buran, who scheduled meetings and served as an excellent translator when required. Thanks are due also to Ms Oana Sarbu, who coordinated the overall review process in an exemplary manner.

ACTIONS SINCE PREVIOUS REVIEW

The University of Oradea responded promptly to the damning report of 2007 by appointing a new senior management team under the direction of a new Rector, Professor Dr, Cornel Antal. The new leadership, supported fully by the UO community, has made excellent progress towards addressing the various areas of concern. Table 4.2 of the institutional self-evaluation report identifies 43 performance indicators which the 2007 report highlighted as being below acceptable standard and describes the actions taken to correct the problems. Many of the actions represent substantial change in institutional culture and, as Universities are notoriously resistant to change, Professor Antal and the UO community should be commended for their ability to effect such change within the given time frame.

It is particularly relevant to note that the process has been achieved without any obvious impact on institutional morale. Indeed, academic colleagues expressed strong commitment to the institution and support for the senior leadership.

Commendations

- *The new leadership of UO has taken appropriate action to address concerns raised in the 2007 ARACIS report;*
- *The remedial actions have been undertaken without any obvious loss of morale within the UO community.*

QUALITY

An institutional commitment to quality requires that the following conditions are satisfied:

- There is a clearly described quality assurance process which is readily available to 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.

The institutional self-evaluation report suggests that these conditions are met at UO and this conclusion was confirmed in meetings with senior officers of the University.

However, it is important to recognise that compliance with the aforementioned conditions and principles is not, by itself an indication that the institution demonstrates outstanding quality in every aspect of its operation. The University of Oradea has made commendable progress since the 2007 ARACIS review but there are many areas in which there is considerable room for improvement. It is encouraging to note that UO is aware of these shortcomings and has identified them as current weaknesses in an honest SWOT analysis presented as part of the institutional self

evaluation report. There is reason to believe that these issues will be addressed in the institutional process of continual improvement.

In addition to overall commitment to quality there are a number of facets of a University's operations which impinge on the overall quality of the institution. These are considered separately below.

STUDENTS

Satisfaction

A meeting with a representative group of about 50 students indicated strong satisfaction with the quality of academic programmes, relations with teachers and overall student experience.

Recent improvements to the orientation process for incoming students were viewed positively although it was felt that a printed guide detailing all relevant information would help new students adjust to the sometimes confusing process of registration, and comprehension of schedules and responsibilities.

As might be expected, opinions varied on academic assessment with most, but not all, students favouring continual assessment throughout the term and testing procedures that examined understanding and problem solving rather than mere memorisation of facts. While acknowledging the logistical constraints imposed by large class sizes, many students would welcome oral examinations.

Some specific suggestions offered by students to enhance the UO experience include:

- Opportunity to include an elective subject in the course of study and, thereby, add value to the educational experience. For example, many students would welcome opportunity to learn another language or study some aspect of business practice in order to increase their job competitiveness after graduation.
- While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in creating course timetables, students expressed frustration about schedules that require long spaces between classes or lengthy distances to travel between closely schedule classes.
- In relation to the lengthy waiting periods between classes, students who live at some distance from the campus would appreciate a "drop-in centre" where they could relax. They feel that the cafeteria and library do not satisfy this need.
- Finally, there was general dissatisfaction with the quality of the graduation diploma. Students feel that they have worked hard for this award and would appreciate a more worthy parchment than the current model.

Student Services

The University of Oradea provides an effective counselling service to students who are experiencing academic or personal difficulties and a member of the teaching staff is assigned to each class as a resource with whom students can consult. In addition, a

careers officer liaises with potential employers, advertises job openings, organises job fairs and counsels students in the preparation of CVs and interview skills. The careers officer provides a vital service for graduating students but, given the size of the University, this is an onerous task for one individual. The limited financial resources of UO and a government-imposed hiring freeze militate against the hiring of additional staff, therefore, consideration should be given to merging the careers office with counselling services and assigning a member of the teaching staff in each faculty to offer career guidance to students.

Recruitment

The ability to attract excellent students to UO is clearly an important determinant of academic success. Students indicated that the major influences in their decision to come to UO were:

- Recommendation from a current or former student;
- Presentation to a high school class by a UO academic;
- Perusal of UO website.

The general impression is that responsibility for student recruitment resides at the level of individual faculties and, inevitably, this leads to inconsistencies. If this impression is correct, there is need for a more coordinated institutional approach to student recruitment, which takes advantage of recent innovations in electronic communication and champions the need for additional scholarships.

Recruitment of international students is the responsibility of the International Relations Department which attracts and supports the specific needs of approximately 700 international students annually. Students indicated appreciation for the opportunity to meet, learn from and interact with students from different cultures.

The Department of Distance Education attracts approximately 1200 students annually.

Commendations

- *Students expressed satisfaction with their experience at UO;*
- *There is evidence of continual improvement in the quality of student services.*

Recommendations

- *Consider suggestions offered by students as detailed above;*
- *Consider restructuring of counselling and career services together with assignment of a few teachers to assist in these key areas;*
- *Consider coordinated institutional approach to student recruitment.*

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The University of Oradea has improved the environment for teaching and learning during the past few years and this is reflected in the favourable comments from students about their courses and teachers.

Annual evaluations of teacher performance are treated seriously with good performance rewarded and penalties applied for poor performance. Efforts to help poor teachers improve the quality of their teaching are practised mainly at the level of the department through the mentorship of senior colleagues.

Despite these positive indicators, it is felt that the importance and profile of teaching at UO could be enhanced by establishment of a central Office of Teaching and Learning with the following mandate:

- To assume overall responsibility to improve teaching and learning at UO;
- To assist new teachers develop excellent pedagogy;
- To provide counsel and support to teachers seeking to improve the quality of their teaching;
- To encourage and support innovation in teaching and learning and to assist the development of effective methods of student assessment;
- To organise a regular series of workshops and seminars designed to raise awareness and improve teaching performance;
- To administer and celebrate annual awards for excellence in teaching.

There are excellent teachers within the University and professional teaching educators who could be assigned responsibility for establishing such an office.

Commendations

- *Annual reviews of teaching performance are conducted in a highly responsible and professional manner;*
- *Relevant feedback is provided to teachers and appropriate actions taken in response to evaluations.*

Recommendations

- *Consider establishment of a central Office of Teaching and Learning.*

RESEARCH

It is extremely difficult to introduce a research culture into an academic institution in which such a culture did not previously exist. Therefore, although there is still much opportunity for improvement, good progress has been made towards the long term goal of developing a strong research ethos at UO. The primary strategy adopted by the University to progress the research agenda is based on provision of generous financial incentives for achievement of specific research targets. Thus academic staff receive financial rewards for articles published in ISI journals, editorship of prestigious journals, supervision of doctoral students, grants and contracts received and, following an annual institutional assessment of research performance, the top 20 researchers receive a reward. Although the system of financial incentives may present difficulties in ensuring fairness between different disciplines, it serves to emphasise the strong commitment and importance placed by the University administration on research.

The challenge faced by UO is to develop strong research activity in those academic areas in which there is no record or history of research excellence. The University should continue to take full advantage of national programmes to repatriate outstanding Romanian scholars who are working abroad. Also, those colleagues who are deemed to have good research potential should be encouraged to spend time with highly productive researchers in other institutions in order to energise their research activity and develop productive research collaborations. In this regard, it would be useful to understand why there is a low uptake of sabbaticals and if any initiatives could be introduced to facilitate greater use of this opportunity.

It should be recognised that no institution can achieve research excellence in every discipline and there would be merit in UO identifying one or two areas in which there is potential for developing an internationally acclaimed centre of research excellence. Every effort should then be made to develop these few centres of excellence through recruitment of outstanding researchers and appropriate deployment of resources.

Commendations

- *UO has demonstrated strong commitment to research through provision of generous financial incentives to productive researchers;*
- *UO has been successful in attracting some major research funding;*
- *In some areas there has been a marked improvement in research performance as measured by such standard parameters of research productivity as publications in high-impact journals, doctoral graduates and funding;*
- *UO has taken advantage of national programmes to repatriate Romanian scholars from abroad to enhance the research capacity of the institution.*

Recommendations

- *Colleagues who are considered to have good research potential should be afforded opportunity to travel and spend time working with productive researchers;*
- *Continue to recognise, celebrate and reward research excellence;*
- *Consider development of one or two internationally recognised centres of research excellence.*

ORGANISATION

Currently, UO has 18 Faculties, 5 teaching departments, 61 departments, 3 CNCIS accredited research centres and 29 additional research centres. This represents a complex organisational structure and it is likely that considerable efficiencies could be achieved by consolidation and reduction of the number of administrative units and has been proposed by the Rector. In addition to the probable efficiencies that would be achieved, the restructuring may lead to greater academic collaboration. Some of the most exciting academic advances are occurring at the interface between disciplines and any initiative to encourage greater cross-disciplinary interaction should be encouraged.

Recommendation

- *Progress plans to restructure the organisation of academic and administrative units.*

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Physical facilities

In recent years the UO, with government support, has built a new library, a new sports hall, a new academic building and acquired new teaching and research equipment. This represents considerable achievement in times of economic constraint.

Commendation

The enhancement of physical facilities at UO in recent years is commendable.

Library

The new library building enriches the campus and serves well the needs of students and academic staff. Transition to electronic cataloguing, access to national and international data bases and textual digitisation is in progress and, when completed, will be an important resource for all members of the UO community.

Commendation

- *The new library is a valuable addition to the UO campus.*

Recommendation

- *Priority should be given to complete the electronic cataloguing and digitisation initiatives.*

Information technology

IT is an integral component of every institute of higher education and, at UO, full advantage has been taken of such technology to improve the effectiveness of teaching, research and administration. As in most Universities that have embraced IT fairly recently, efficiencies could be achieved with greater coordination of the IT function. Specifically, UO should develop a coordinated University-wide strategy for software, which would agree software that could be purchased on an institutional basis rather than permitting the more costly process of separate purchases at the level of individual departments. The proposed strategy should consider also the relative merits of leasing rather than purchasing certain software packages.

The University is actively pursuing an EU initiative to create a campus-wide wireless environment and, although this will generate some security issues, the overall impact will be highly positive. In association with this wireless environment, UO should attempt to enter into an agreement with a major computer manufacturer to make available year-old surplus laptops for use by students.

Commendations

- *IT is used effectively to enhance teaching, research and administration.*

Recommendations

- *Establish an IT working group to develop an institutional policy on IT matters including purchase/leasing of software, security of sensitive information in a wireless environment, copyright issues related to textual digitisation;*
- *Invite one or more major computer manufacturers to collaborate in providing students with laptops from redundant inventory.*

GOVERNMENT-IMPOSED CONSTRAINTS

A recurring theme throughout the visit related to the negative impact of new legislation and government interventions on the University's ability to achieve its stated mission and pursue a quality agenda. All members of the University community expressed frustration about what are perceived as excessive requests from government for information. Meeting these demands consumes valuable time and detracts from effective discharge of academic activities. The question must be asked if such bureaucracy is necessary and, if so, could it be gathered more efficiently.

Particular concern was expressed about recent legislation which requires mandatory retirement at the age of 65 years. In other countries with mandatory retirement, the ruling is enacted at the end of the academic term in which the individual reaches the age of retirement. This allows him/her to discharge current teaching duties and ensures that students are not disadvantaged by a change of teacher during a course. The requirement that a University teacher must retire on his/her 65th birthday demonstrates a lack of understanding of higher education and jeopardises seriously the quality of education provided to students. The requirement also places considerable strain upon the academic institution which cannot reasonably be expected to find a replacement teacher to complete a course at short notice.

Additional problems have been caused by the recent hiring freeze and by the severe reduction in salaries which have reduced considerably the competitiveness of Romanian Universities to recruit top class scholars.

It is widely acknowledged that Universities have a vital role to play in the global growth opportunities offered by the knowledge based economy. In order for Romania to take full advantage of its considerable intellectual and entrepreneurial resources, it is essential that it supports its University system.

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- *Students expressed satisfaction with their experience at UO;*
- *There is evidence of continual improvement in the quality of student services.*

Recommendations

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