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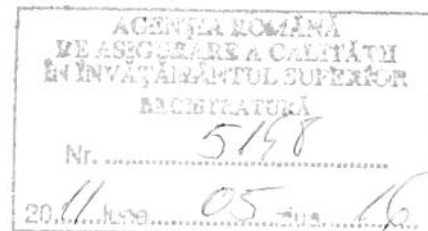
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Review of

Apollonia University of Iasi

Report of International Reviewer

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May 2011

INTRODUCTION

This report forms part of an external assessment of Appollonia University of Iasi (AUI), commissioned by the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ARACIS). The report is based on information provided in a self-evaluation analysis prepared by AUI, perusal of the AUI website and from intelligence gained during a site visit to AUI during 3-6th May 2011.

During the site visit, in my capacity as international reviewer, I met separately with the University president, deans, directors of research, library, IT services and representative groups of faculty and students. These meetings afforded excellent opportunity to gain an overall perspective of the University and the institutional commitment to academic excellence and quality.

It is appropriate to indicate that my task was facilitated greatly by the full cooperation provided by President Vasile Burlui and his colleagues and their willingness to discuss all facets of the institutional operation in an open, frank manner and to make available all information requested. The utility and effectiveness of the site visit was enhanced also by the outstanding efforts of Dr Christina Emanuela Dascalu who coordinated meetings, responded efficiently to all requests and served as an excellent translator throughout the visit. Finally, I acknowledge the excellent support and assistance provided by Ms. Carmen Mirian who coordinated all arrangements relating to the visit.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Although AUI first admitted students to programmes in Dental Medicine, Dental Technology and Dental Nursing in 1990, it was recognized legally as part of the national higher education system only in July 2002 with two primary academic units, Faculty of Dental Medicine and Faculty of Communication Sciences. AUI functions as a private University but in full compliance with national legislation governing higher education.

The status of AUI as a relatively new, private University presents particular challenges and opportunities that distinguish it from State Universities. It is useful to identify these features at the outset in order to place the institutional review in context.

New Universities face an immediate challenge in gaining acceptance among potential students, faculty and the higher education establishment. This impinges on the ability to recruit excellent students and faculty and in forging collaborations with other institutions. AUI has put a major effort into recruitment of students with faculty and existing students actively involved in promoting the University to secondary schools in the region. Students and staff in the Faculty of Communications contribute also to the promotional efforts with clever use of new media. The recruitment of faculty has not been as great a problem as might be expected because of the large numbers of Romanian scholars seeking employment in the higher education sector. Furthermore, the requirement that faculty in state Universities must retire at the age of 65, has enabled AUI, as a privately funded institution, to offer positions to some excellent academicians. Private Universities are challenged also by the need to generate revenue. They cannot rely on state funding for operational or capital costs and they are unable to take advantage of collaborative arrangements among state Universities for shared resources such as inter-library loans.

However, these constraints are balanced by the greater freedom available to private Universities to innovate and AUI has availed of this opportunity to develop a highly student-centred pedagogy as well as the aforementioned deployment of retired academicians.

Commendations

AUI has recognized the importance of student recruitment and developed a "brand" among regional secondary schools as a small University which offers small class sizes, student-centred pedagogy, highly practical vocational training and close interaction between faculty and students.

AUI has taken advantage of the State's eminently reasonable policy of mandatory retirement at age 65 to recruit recently retired academicians and, thereby, gain from the experience and knowledge of these distinguished scholars.

Recommendations

Priority should continue to be given to institutional promotion and recruitment of excellent students using the creative expertise within the Faculty of Communications and involvement of current faculty and students in visits to schools. This effort is likely to be especially important during the current recessionary times when students may be less able to afford the fees required to attend a private University.

AUI should continue to take advantage of available academic expertise resulting from mandatory retirement programmes. The government policy is eminently sensible and appropriate within the state University system as it opens up career opportunities for young academics. However, private Universities should be encouraged to exploit this talent pool and, thereby, ensure that the expertise of retired scholars is available to students and, through research, to the nation. This policy is deployed successfully in many countries with Japan being a prime example.

QUALITY

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education identifies seven criteria which are deemed essential to demonstrate institutional commitment to quality. These are:

- Clearly defined and readily accessible policies and procedures for quality

assurance;

- Periodic monitoring and review of all programmes;
- Published criteria, regulations and procedures for assessment of students;
- Established criteria and procedures for quality assurance of teaching staff;
- Adequate and appropriate resources for support of student learning;
- Appropriate use of information systems for effective management of all programmes;
- Regular publication of information about programmes and awards.

On the strength of information contained in the self-evaluation report and from interviews with senior administrators, faculty and students, it appears that AUI satisfies most of these criteria and is an institute which has embraced a quality culture.

The institutional "Quality Textbook" describes the policies and procedures related to quality and the process is managed by the "Commission for Ensuring Quality", a body comprising representatives from faculty, students and graduates. Students are aware of assessment procedures based on learning outcomes and expressed satisfaction with the system. Each faculty member is evaluated annually in a process involving student questionnaires and one-on-one meetings with senior academic leaders and the President. AUI provides some excellent student support services especially in health and career counseling but acknowledge in the SWOT analysis presented in the self-evaluation report that there are weaknesses in current library space and acquisitions budget. There appear also to be opportunities for improvement in the development and use of management information systems for ongoing analysis of programmes and operational activities. The Faculty of Communications provides excellent service in helping to promote and publicise AUI but the SWOT analysis suggests that even greater efforts must be made in order to raise the local, regional and national profile of the University.

Commendations

AUI has endeavoured to embrace a culture of quality throughout the institution with published policies and procedures and appropriate bodies in place to ensure compliance with institutional requirements;

Evaluation of faculty performance is considered seriously at all levels of the University;

Students expressed satisfaction with assessment procedures and feel also that their feedback about faculty performance is carefully considered and, when appropriate, action is taken to effect improvement.

Recommendations

Although students expressed satisfaction with their experience at AUI, a dedicated staff member with responsibility for student welfare and provision of services could enhance the student experience even further. Such a staff member would be responsible for regular satisfaction surveys, maintaining data on needs, utilisation of existing services, organizing workshops/seminars and proposing new initiatives;

AUI should address concerns identified in the SWOT analysis about library space and acquisitions and institutional publicity and profile;

AUI should introduce training to ensure that all members of the community are computer literate. This will allow them to make use of new technologies in their teaching and enable them to contribute to and participate in effective use of management information systems

for regular analysis and monitoring of trends and performance.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

As indicated in the previous section, students interviewed during the site visit expressed considerable satisfaction with their experience at AUI. They were attracted to AUI initially by the concept of small class sizes, close relationship with teachers and the strong emphasis placed on student-centred learning. All felt that these expectations had been realized. They considered the teachers to be friends and partners in their education and indicated satisfaction with the tutorial system. Positive comments were offered also about the practical nature of the training received and the exceptionally high employment rate of graduates. The orientation was considered excellent and facilitated the transition from secondary school to tertiary education.

Commendation

AUI has emphasized a student-centred pedagogy which is greatly appreciated by the students who feel that this helps their academic growth as independent thinkers. Use of a tutorial system with each student assigned to an academic mentor is another commendable innovation.

Recommendation

Students recognize the spatial constraints under which AUI operates but clearly would appreciate any initiatives that would reduce travel between the different sites in which the campus is located and better parking provision. In the short term, some of these concerns might be addressed by judicious timetabling although such solutions are not easy to enact.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Teaching

In 1986, the Carnegie Foundation report on higher education stated that *"the undergraduate experience, at its best, involves active learning and disciplined enquiry that leads to the intellectual empowerment of students"*. The report argues for a shift from the traditional teacher-centred didacticism to a more student-centred, form of pedagogy. It has been difficult for most traditional Universities to effect such change due to the intransigence of faculty and inflexible academic structures. Therefore, it is encouraging to note that AUI has taken advantage of its lack of tradition and entrenched structures to introduce and pursue a student-centred pedagogy.. The traditional pedagogy of lectures, note taking and content-based assessment does not provide the best learning experience and AUI should be commended for its innovation.

However, optimal exploitation of student-centred learning requires that students have ready access to current information through electronic data bases, web based learning programmes and CD ROMS. Unfortunately, at AUI, these essential complements to traditional library resources are not as readily available as would be desired. Students use other library resources that are available in Iasi but, obviously, AUI has no control over the acquisitions policies and operation of these libraries.

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates, in 1999, recommended that, in addition to student –centred learning, Universities should move towards the concept of research-led teaching and learning with students actively involved in research projects.

The report argued that active participation in research will imbue learners with greater enthusiasm and passion for the subject and help to develop the skills associated with problem solving. Again, it is encouraging to note that AUI has taken some steps towards embracing this form of pedagogy. However, again, the initiative cannot be fully adopted because of spatial and financial constraints.

Commendation

AUI has embraced the concept of student-centred, research-led teaching and learning and, thereby, offers students an excellent learning experience

Recommendation

Optimal benefits of the innovative pedagogic strategies are not realized because of lack of information resources, scientific research equipment and spatial constraints. Efforts should be made to identify AUI as a pilot for innovative teaching and learning strategies and seek funding, perhaps from EU, to compensate for the current lack of resources.

Research

The discovery of new knowledge is an essential role for institutes of higher education. AUI acknowledges this responsibility and emphasizes research as an important component in the annual performance evaluations of faculty. Several institutional initiatives have been introduced in order to encourage and facilitate research activity. These include establishment of a Board of Scientific Research, establishment of the Ioan Haulica Research Institute and the Morris Clark Narco-Sedation Centre, encouragement of faculty to complete research degrees at the doctoral level, organization of research seminars and colloquia and publication of two research journals.

These initiatives and actions demonstrate strong institutional commitment to research but, as is typical in a relatively new institution, the efforts are not reflected yet in strong, productive research programmes. There are a few areas in which interesting research is being pursued but, based on perusal of international data bases and citation indices, the overall quality and productivity of research is low. Several factors contribute to this situation including the absence of post-graduate research programmes, the inability of faculty to attract substantial research funding from external sources and the inability of AUI faculty to establish viable research collaborations with scholars in other institutions.

Commendation

AUI has recognized a responsibility to undertake research and has introduced several strategies to encourage such activity.

Faculty members interviewed appear strongly committed to the development of strong research programmes and deserve credit for pursuing research agenda under difficult circumstances.

Recommendations

AUI should consider identification of one or two areas in which the institution can aspire to develop a centre of research excellence. Funding agencies tend to favour research programmes that can demonstrate a critical mass of complementary research expertise over individual "lone ranger" researchers. Criteria for identifying the proposed research areas should include existing research leader(s) with proven record of research productivity and potential for support from several sources;

Faculty whose research interests do not fit conveniently into the designated centres of research excellence should be encouraged to develop research collaborations with scholars in other institutions.

The institutional strategic development plan should place high priority on the introduction of post-graduate programmes of study.

FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

Private Universities without large financial endowments are likely to face problems with space and equipment for teaching and research. AUI is not an exception in this regard and the institution suffers from having a campus spread over three complexes, each of which is about a ten-minute walk from the other. Classrooms and laboratories are small for the number of students being taught and the equipment, although modern, is not available in sufficient quantity to allow students adequate opportunity to gain total familiarity with it. Further spatial constraints are evident in the library with only eight computer terminals to serve the needs of 800 students. In spite of these constraints, AUI manages the physical resources that are available to it as efficiently and effectively as possible and, as indicated previously, students receive a good learning experience. Most students have their own lap tops to compensate for the lack of computer terminals and the campus-wide wireless environment allows them to access the data bases that are available. They also avail of services provided by other libraries in Iasi. However, the need for additional space and more equipment is urgent and should be addressed.

Commendation

AUI makes best possible use of the limited space and facilities available to it and provides its students with a good learning experience which prepares them well for future careers.

Recommendation

AUI should give high priority to expansion and, if possible, consolidation of its current campus into a single site. This will require an innovative strategy of capital fund-raising using all available sources of funding (see below).

FUNDING

AUI, like most private Universities is challenged continually to generate the funding required for ongoing operational expenses and capital expenditures. At AUI, the major source of revenue for operational costs is student fees which accounts for approximately 96% of operational income. This is a worrying situation because it requires that students, in the present recessionary times, are able and willing to continue to pay fees. There is danger also that strong dependence on income from student fees will encourage eventually a relaxing of admission standards in order to maintain the required levels of income; indeed AUI should be commended for the fact that they have not pursued this tempting strategy to date.

It is clear that additional sources of funding need to be found and innovative strategies pursued to broaden the financial base of the University. The following suggestions are offered for consideration by the senior management of AUI:

Entrepreneurial activity

AUI is already generating some revenue from the provision of dental services to patients.

However, there is a substantial global market for such services and potential for development of a successful company, in which AUI holds 100% equity, which markets services internationally, manages the business and returns all profits to AUI.

Current entrepreneurial activity within the Faculty of Communications in marketing and technical writing could also be developed to ensure a useful revenue stream.

Philanthropy

Philanthropic donations form an important part of the budget in most US Universities and increasingly in Western Europe. There may be merit in exploring the potential of the Romanian Diaspora in North America to contribute to the growth and development of AUI. A presidential visit with specific projects and naming opportunities in mind could yield rich rewards.

European Union

The EU has a number of grant programmes for which AUI may be eligible. As an example, the lack of access for physically challenged students and patients at AUI is in contravention of EU legislation and it may be possible to apply for capital funds to correct this shortcoming. A well presented proposal could provide some much needed space.

Recommendation

Every effort should be made to reduce dependence on student fees for operating expenses and innovative strategies developed to generate funds for capital projects.

CONCLUSION

As a relatively new, private University, AUI has performed commendably to become established as a viable institution offering degree programmes at the baccalaureate level. Students appreciate the institute's emphasis on student-centred learning and, in spite of limited physical and financial resources the student experience appears to be highly positive. Furthermore, the practical and vocational nature of the training ensures that all students obtain employment upon graduation. However, the institute faces serious problems as a result of spatial constraints which must be resolved before any expansion or even offerings of post-graduate programmes can be contemplated.