

Victor Babes



Introduction: mission and objectives

This is an ambitious institution with a clearly defined mission. What is less clear is the trajectory required to make the transition from a good university to an excellent one. The self-evaluation document prepared by the University served as a good introduction to the institution although it was more descriptive than evaluative. Meetings throughout the visit were cordial and productive – students and staff communicated openly and in English or, occasionally French of an excellent standard. The University deserves credit for the way in which it has produced and is producing healthcare professionals with good language and communication skills.

Infrastructure

The buildings seem to be in good condition, well maintained and in excellent decorative condition. Although not a specialist, the laboratories seemed to me to be well equipped with modern equipment. The one exception seems to be the library in the main building. It looks and feels old fashioned. It was overheated when we visited it and at least one desk was blocking the door, an obvious safety hazard. The library was full when we visited it, a good sign and perhaps evidence that a new library would be welcomed. When we visited the university it was snowing outside and the tiled floors, slippery, were dangerous and an obvious safety hazard, in spite of the warning signs. It might be prudent to add more non-slip mats before somebody breaks a leg.

Quality assurance and Teaching

Within the University, while there is a clear ambition to introduce a genuine quality culture, this is still very much work in progress. The internal quality manual is not yet complete and it is not available on the staff intranet, which is obviously where it should be so that new (and older) staff can consult it with ease. The process of quality assurance is being led by well-meaning and devoted academic staff whose priorities naturally lie elsewhere. The University would be wise, when finances permit, to consider the establishment of a quality assurance office staffed by professional administrators, liberating academics to undertake their prime objectives of research and teaching. This would encourage a university-wide consistency and produce a possible centre of excellence for other institutions. The University has a clear methodology for the collection of and analysis of student evaluations but evidence from meetings with students would suggest that not all teaching in the institution is of the highest quality, nor indeed that all the students are fully committed to their studies. On two different occasions I was told that some lectures were disrupted by noisy students who were preventing the other students from hearing properly. This is clearly unacceptable in a university situation. In any large institution there will be teachers who are excellent and others who are less gifted. This seems to be the case here but it is not clear that the standard evaluation form with its ticked boxes is identifying those areas where action is needed. The standard evaluation form may need to be revised to incorporate a section for free form comments so that there is a real dialogue that emerges from the forms. Ticking boxes does not always reveal any problems that may exist.

Of particular note is the *eMediqual* project that has brought together a number of Romanian and European universities and has led to shared knowledge about teaching methods in medical universities. Students and staff have benefitted from this project which has provided workshops for staff and students. Victor Babes is the lead partner in Romania. Discussions with colleagues active in the project showed real enthusiasm and a genuine belief that this project would lead to exciting modernisation of the teaching of the curriculum both locally and nationally. The project money is coming to an end but I sense that there is real value in this project involving staff and students and leading to genuine innovation in the teaching of the medical curriculum.

1/12/2013


Research

Research excellence is one of the ambitions of the University but it is presently hampered by a lack of resources. Research Income from the state has been in steady decline since 2008 and it is evident that in a medical faculty where research of high quality is expensive, this will have a deleterious effect. While there has been evidence in recent years of increased publication in high impact journals of international status, which is clearly one of the ambitions of the Institution and is to be praised, funding remains a major issue that will need to be resolved if the university is going to move into the next league. Medical research is costly and money is in short supply. It may be that the solution lies in the development of an aggressive entrepreneurial campaign, although I recognise that this may not be part of the Romanian culture and there will be resistance to it. Examples from other European countries will show that dynamic research institutions need to be much more active in securing the funds they need for projects and specialist equipment. Admitting growing numbers of non-EU students will not solve the problem as it will lead to increased teaching commitments and a reduction in the number of trained medical professionals for the region and the country. It also increases the burden on the international office. Generally, a point I have made before, across the University, there would seem to be a lack of trained professional staff supporting key academics. A dynamic research office supporting the enthusiasm of individuals, with professionals identifying research opportunities, supporting those preparing substantial applications by offering expertise and financial advice, can have striking benefits. Again, there is an initial cost but a good unit will soon pay for itself. Furthermore, low salaries in Romania will not attract top researchers from other countries so that there is a risk that research activity does not benefit from the kind of rich exchanges that come with major international collaborations. I recognise and respect that there is a culture in Romania whereby universities will often recruit their own graduates to permanent positions. However, this is not what happens in most major research universities who will be keen to recruit top researchers from any suitable environment. What the French would call a 'brassage' of cultures, a mixture of cultures, can have surprising benefits for a research community.

The strategy defined on p. 25 of the self-evaluation document talks of 'strengthening and development of management capacities'. This is a worthy aim, as indeed are the others, but such action requires resources and these have yet to be found.

International office

The increasing numbers of non-Romanian students, both EU and non-EU introduces further pressure points. Checking the applications from students from a variety of countries is specialised and difficult work. It may look attractive, financially, to recruit growing numbers of students from other countries but the University would do well to do this in a planned manner taking full account of the non-visible costs involved. The number of Erasmus exchanges and partners is relatively modest. There can be no doubt that significant numbers of foreign students will enrich the university community, and give a real international flavour to the environment. If there were a greater mix of nationalities amongst the staff, that might also be an ambition to be sought, if the university wished to be truly international. International students spoke very warmly of the work of the International office which was, they said, their first port of call for advice and support. They also praised the very useful section on the University web pages which gave full details about how to apply to be a student at the University. A recent development which is to be welcomed is the establishment of an office offering advice for students, especially first years, who need support in various kinds for their studies or who have personal problems. This same office also organises cultural activity in the University which is especially useful for students from different backgrounds who need support and encouragement in order to integrate in the University community. There is some good work taking place in this area and the University can be proud of the way it attracts and cares for a wide variety of international students. At the same time, it will need to consider this activity as part of its larger strategy.

 1/12/2013

Small Group Meetings


Heads of departments are important figures in the university hierarchy. They manage staff, direct teaching and research. Secretaries have an important role to play as contact people for students. This is fine, on condition that they are adequately trained for their job. It became clear over and over again that the university is not well served in terms of administration. Not all the secretaries have the modern skills associated with the job and a number of tasks would be better undertaken by professional administrative staff rather than by academics. Academics need support to do their work effectively but at the moment they are doing much of the support themselves. This does not happen in major research institutions across the world.

Students were not able to say that teaching in the university was uniformly excellent although on the whole they were extremely positive about their learning experience. They enjoyed being students of the university. They felt they had the chance to make their voices heard but there were some elements they could do little about. There was a view expressed that some teachers would benefit from practical training, class management, communication skills. New staff joining the university do not seem to undergo a formal training programme to produce excellent teachers. Colleagues said it took 5-6 years before they became confident teachers – experienced teachers who have proven excellence can teach young staff a lot and save them a lot of stress and heartache.

Students were positive about the accommodation provided in residences, about the approachability of staff and, for medical students, the clinical training. Students in general medicine complained about the workloads in the second semester of the final year, dentistry students complained about the lack of practical training and all agreed that the library was due for an update. However, when questioned, the students admitted that they had not attempted to initiate any changes with their tutors, which is somewhat surprising. In a university where there is a genuine quality culture students and staff would have the kind of debates that will lead to positive change and improvement. I sense that this may not form part of the culture in a Romanian university, but there are plenty of examples to show that well-organised staff-student committees that meet regularly can iron out any problems and lead to genuine improvement. There was a general view that students were well represented on Senate with the generous figure of 25% of the membership. They could make their points and initiate change when they had the will to do so. On the whole students seemed well satisfied with their condition and were not seeking radical change. They enthused about the introduction of the learning platform, Moodle, and regretted that fact that staff were not using it in a uniform manner. This is something the university will want to consider as it moves forward as it may well offer solutions to the current problem of overteaching.

In conclusion, this is a university where the student experience is clearly positive. As in many, perhaps all Romanian universities, there is a shortage of trained professional administrative support staff with the result that academic staff are being taken away from their prime objectives of research and teaching to undertake more mundane tasks for which they have not been prepared. The lack of autonomy in this institution is hampering its progress. Lack of funds is having an obvious negative effect on research activity and production. Ideas about income generation exist but there is, as yet, no obvious locus for this activity in the university. This is an institution with a new management regime so it is still early days. A clear strategy exists but there will need to be a defined list of objectives and targets against which to measure progress. At the moment the task of taking the university forward against a background of severe budgetary cuts is huge. The will is clearly there but the means may be lacking. Imaginative solutions will need to be considered.

Malcolm Cook, Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter, GB, 1.12.2013

 1/12/2013


Appendix

Formal meetings

Students: Not a very productive meeting as it took a while to get going. There was a shared view that students have a voice in the university and that their comments are acted upon. They were generally very positive about their university, the living conditions and the learning resources. There were some critical comments about the learning platform, Moodle, because it was not fully used by all staff.

Graduates: These were mostly students of medicine who gave the opposing view that the students did not have much of a voice in the university. There were differing views about assessment and a feeling that students had insufficient access to the more experienced staff. IT facilities were not strong. There appears to be no formal Alumni association, something the University may wish to consider.

Employers: this was mostly populated by employers who had some kind of association with the University, as hospital directors etc. The view emerged that the University could play a greater role in coordinating local initiatives, for example by bringing together directors of 'residents'. But this was not really a meeting taking the opinion of objective local employers as too many of those present had one foot in the university.

 1/12/2013