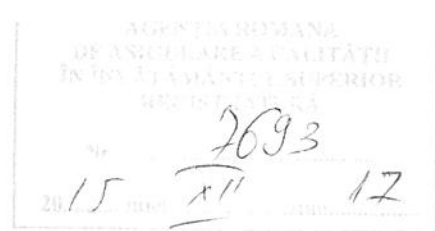


Sapientia, Hungarian University of Transylvania



The University is a somewhat curious institution, offering students tuition at three sites, some way distant from each other, and in a language (Hungarian) that is not the language of the country in which they find themselves. The University offers students the possibility of study in newly-built superb buildings with state of the art facilities: the building in Cluj-Napoca has an odd combination of subjects based on considerations of what the Hungarian community needs and conscious too of avoiding direct competition with its larger neighbour in the same city. The buildings, all of very recent construction and in excellent shape, offer good libraries, excellent IT facilities, laboratories and classrooms. The Faculties are constructed not by cognate subjects but by the fact that the subjects are taught at a particular site.

The central administration is housed in an ancient building in the town centre of Cluj-Napoca - again, there is a good working environment with good facilities. The building offers excellent work conditions. There is warmth and a sense of collegiality in this university and a real sense of shared mission.

Throughout the visit meetings with a mixed group of staff allowed genuine discussion about the nature of the environment in which they worked, their working conditions, equipment needs etc. There were no complaints of substance, although a feeling was expressed that salaries were not generous, but it was recognised that this was a factor in the country in which they worked. The risk, of course, is that the best staff will be attracted by higher salaries elsewhere. The staff were enthusiastic, proud, and clear about their job conditions. While salaries are low the staff did not seem resentful and were content in their jobs, happy with their working conditions. They said that money was available through departments for conferences. While student evaluations are uniformly undertaken there appeared to be no clear means of feedback to the participating students and no programme committees. Informality is the rule of the institution, like a family, but can this work across the whole institution, on three sites? The university might want to establish programme committees that would involve staff and students, alumni and external stakeholders to consider student feedback, contents of the curriculum and fitness for purpose. It might also want to develop more formal practices in order that the three sites work in similar fashion. A teaching manual that would be used by staff and students in all three sites might be worth considering.

A meeting with a small group of students in Cluj-Napoca was a disappointment. The students were generally uncritical, unresponsive, and claimed there were no issues of concern, no problems with the teaching, resources, conditions and it is not difficult to understand their contentment. However, they were not really able to articulate the good points, of which, clearly, there are many. We can conclude therefore that there is not much wrong and presume that the university is performing well in its teaching function. I am not qualified to comment on the nature of research undertaken but all the evidence in the two sites I visited in person would suggest that this is a university that is well above average. It is seen as a 'private' university' but it does not feel like one, receiving funding from the Hungarian state. At the more formal meeting with students on the first afternoon it was again difficult to provoke responses. The students said they had chosen this university because of its reputation and the curriculum - but also primarily because of the language of tuition, mostly Hungarian. They could formulate no shortcomings, nor were they very forthcoming about the evident qualities of the institution. They were well briefed about the nature of plagiarism and said that assessed work was returned promptly and with good feedback, that work was marked by two markers, providing security of standards. This feels like a serious university with ambition, with relatively young staff and a real sense of community.

The formal meeting of alumni of the university gave us a group of individuals who were pleased with the education they had received. They said that there were active but informal relationships with staff, that staff were responsive and helpful. They would enthusiastically recommend their university to others. There does appear yet to be a formal alumni association, which is something

the university will want to consider. The university was now in much better physical shape, they said, than when they were students. The building and facilities seemed superb and they expressed the view that present students were more fortunate than they had been.

The meeting with employers was again positive. The students were well trained and competent. They said that there was no central office working with external partners, no formal relationship, that much of the work they undertook was informal and based on acquaintance and contacts. The university might want to consider whether it would be beneficial to have a central office dealing with stakeholders locally and nationally, establishing more formal partnerships.

On the second day I visited a second campus at Targu-Mures. This is a brand new building on a generous site, with room for expansion. Again, the facilities were seen to be first class. The classrooms were bright and well equipped, the laboratories, as far as I can judge, are well equipped and suitable for the purposes for which they were built. Again, there is an odd combination of subjects available in this 'faculty' but it seemed to work - staff and students were clearly content and here, as indeed in Cluj, staff and students had fluency in English. There is some interesting research taking place in the sciences and we saw evidence of some innovative and exciting teaching, in particular on the teaching of algorithms.

We visited the newly-built student residences on the site. They are well planned, generous and well equipped. The costs are very reasonable and the residences are run on a not-for-profit.

On the final day we had a short vide-conference link with staff and students from Miercurea-Ciuc. Again, there were no issues of substance, student staff relations seemed good, the facilities and resources attracted no adverse comments.

Erasmus - students seemed to think that such relationships only worked with universities in Hungary - clearly not the case as the University has 38 Erasmus partners, but this is a perception that must be rectified. The University will need to encourage more students to take advantage of student mobility. At the moment the majority of the exchanges seem to be with universities in Hungary, which is an easy option but not one that will challenge students culturally or linguistically.

Quality Assurance – the system clearly works well because of the devotion and industry of a number of individuals. However, working on three sites presents particular problems and the university might want to consider establishing a true teaching quality manual available across the sites on the intranet, available to staff and students. It might also want to consider whether it is sensible to have this activity organised by academics rather than a dedicated officer or officers, releasing academics for their true function of teaching and research.

Conclusions:

This would appear to be a small university that is working at well above average level. Well planned, carefully thought through and managed with skill and efficiency, it nevertheless presents a somewhat curious institution - this is not intended to be a criticism. So we have an institution in Romania funded through a foundation with finance provided essentially by the Hungarian state. The English section on the foundation on the web site is blank so it was not easy for me to get the details other than by word of mouth. It is a private university as defined by Romania but it feels in many ways like a state university. The Board of Trustees comprises major figures in the various churches but this is not in any way a religious institution. On the contrary, it treads a careful path of independence, appointing staff on the basis of merit and selecting students by various appropriate means. Staff speak Hungarian, of course, and also Romanian and usually English or less typically German. Students speak at least two languages and usually three. They appear to be committed to their studies and evaluate their teachers positively. In short, this would appear to be a university that knows itself and knows where it is going. It has research ambitions and these seem to be



being realised. Staff are well qualified, research active and care about their teaching and their students.

Recommendations: I will not stray into the area of salaries as that is not my domain. Suffice it to say that these seem very low in the European context.

The University because of what it is and because of the language of instruction is not attracting international staff. However, Cluj-Napoca in particular is an attractive city and it should surely be possible to find more ways of bringing in international research professors of prestige to give a few lectures in English and to work with colleagues on research projects and networks.

Students seemed unaware of the range of exchange opportunities that were available to them. I recognise that this is still early days but the university might want to set itself targets for those countries where it would welcome exchanges of staff and students. And it should consider more international partners beyond Europe looking in particular for institutions with a similar mix of subjects.

The quality assurance processes seem to work but there appears to be no central focus as there would be in many universities. This is particularly the case when the university is working at different sites. There should be a single agreed document where staff and students can refer to when any issues arise. It may be wise to use an administrator in this area, somebody working with academics who can ensure the currency of the procedures and do the mapping against the European Standards and Guidelines. That said, the standards seem to be secure and double marking appears to be the norm.

I asked whether the University had a risk register - the reaction was if I had come from another planet. It is normal practice in the UK now for institutions to consider risk and think about ways of reducing or coping with risk. This may not be the norm in Romania or indeed Hungary but I would recommend that such a register becomes the norm so that students and staff are protected in the case of major risk - like fire, loss of data, loss of key staff etc. It is as well to be prepared, to plan ahead in case of emergency.

Universities need to work with local businesses and stakeholders yet there seems to be no central office or individual in the University whose role is to liaise with local stakeholders and to be the point of contact, to arrange work placements and also to assess whether any applied research might be undertaken at cost, giving the university a source of income.

I was surprised to find on the 'languages' day that significant areas of the University were not being used: the film studio and the laboratories. Is the university making the best use of its space? This may be a timetabling issue but it can surely make little sense to have large areas unused during the normal working day.

It is of course very difficult, in so little time, to get fully to grips with an institution like this one. However, my general feeling is very positive. The University gives a good impression of itself and from my perspective there are no major issues of concern.

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