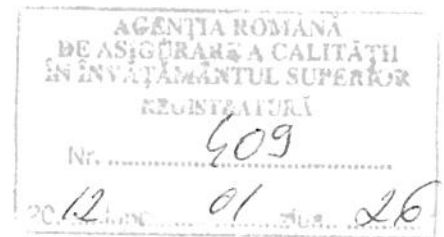


Universitatea 'Andrea Saguna; din Constanta



This is an unusual university. Private, with extremely low fees, the outsider will wonder how it can fund its numerous activities. The buildings are modern, clean and well maintained. The classrooms are very traditional in terms of layout, suggesting perhaps that the teaching remains in a traditional format with the seminar format and one that we did see was too big for its apparent purpose.

The University is naturally very proud of its achievements with photos and visual presentations scattered around the public spaces. It has achieved a lot in just 20 years of existence. There is a policy of inviting important people to the University and such occasions seem to lead to a photo shoot that is then used for publicity purposes. There is an obvious preoccupation with China, probably because there is a consulate in the city, but the benefits to the students and staff are not obvious, although we did learn that there were some scholarships and there are now plans to develop a partnership involving other institutions that might lead to more obvious academic advantages.

The funding of the University is, to me, something of a mystery. I fail to comprehend how a university can pay academics plus other administrative support staff, heat and light its premises, buy IT equipment etc. on the basis of student fees of the equivalent of 400 euros a year. We heard that there were other funding opportunities, through consultancy work, applied research, and the commercial income derived from real estate, including a hotel. But for me, at least, this is a strange model. Universities do not usually run hotels or speculate

on property prices. On the other hand, if this allows the university to function with reduced fees, there must be some benefit.

The students and graduates whom we met, both in a large group and in a much smaller group that I requested, were universally positive. They spoke of excellent relations with staff, of dedicated teachers, of a convivial atmosphere; they were not displeased with the library that looked, to me, tiny for a university library, nor on the whole with the rather dated geography of the teaching rooms with fixed seats and tables, not conducive to small group teaching or the easy exchange of ideas in a seminar group. Some did say that they felt the University might challenge them more, give them more responsibility for their learning, and push them harder. But the overall view both from students and graduates of the university was positive. They often came to this university because of a bad experience elsewhere, because of its reputation, its relative flexibility, because it offered courses not available in the near vicinity. The alumni were most supportive but some felt that the university might ask more of them, to support its mission.

There was no mention of the Bologna process in any of the meetings I attended, although it was clear that the students appreciated the chance of study abroad, even if the numbers are small. There is no dedicated Erasmus office, nor indeed an international office, and when finances permit this is something the University might want to consider: bring in specialist staff to deal with the administration and management of international links and exchanges.

Teaching staff appear to be content and it was difficult to identify, from the people we met, any staff with particular complaints. Teaching loads seem

relatively heavy, almost too heavy if the university is going to achieve any significant research ambitions. To be commended is the process of peer review of teaching, which is compulsory, and the mentoring of younger staff. It is always difficult to get to the heart of the matter when individuals and small groups that one sees have been selected by the University itself. It is likely that they will be fully supportive and uncritical.

As mentioned above, the University has particularly close relations with China. The reasons for this would seem to be based on convenience rather than on any defined strategic vision. Close relations with the local consulate have facilitated the provision of visas for travel to China and the Chinese authorities have been generous in the provision of books for the library. However, there seem, at the moment at least and certainly not historically, to be any research or teaching reasons for this relationship. As mentioned above, a recent agreement may lead to more concrete plans for concerted research activity, but those plans are as yet undeveloped. The University seems to take an eclectic view of international relations. It has close links with Turkey but it does not have a strategic mission to seek and identify particularly appropriate partners that would work closely with the disciplines it teaches. It has no obvious process either for reviewing the effectiveness of its various partnerships. Some will die a natural death. There is no dedicated international office as such but this work lies with one of the vice-rectors. It is important that a small university should be selective in its choice of partners and it should review their utility every five years or so.

The University seems to work well within a limited sphere of activity. Its range of activities is, however, relatively small. Research does not appear to be a major preoccupation of management or staff, certainly not pure research of the kind that might be published in top peer-reviewed journals, although we were told that this is changing. Staff are expected to undertake research and some small research groups have been formed. And there is obvious enthusiasm among certain individuals and it is clear that there is potential here. However, at this stage in its development this university can hardly be defined as a research institution. There is limited support for the research activity of staff and responsibility for monitoring the quality of production and the activity of staff lies with the head of department. A clear and forceful strategic choice will need to be made if the university is going to make real progress, seek to publish in top ranked journals, give papers at major conferences and become a significant research player. This will require significant funding and strategic promotion. As in many other Romanian institutions, there are no sabbatical leaves available for staff and the teaching loads seem relatively heavy, too heavy certainly to allow research ideas to develop and prosper.

The University does some have some staff exchanges under the Erasmus framework but not a single member of the academic staff is other than Romanian. This may not be unusual but it does suggest a kind of family cosiness which is appreciated by staff and students – the impression one gets is of a good teaching university that has a dedicated pedagogic mission, but not one that seeks to challenge received ideas or to move forward the boundaries of knowledge. The University, in common with many others, tends to appoint

former graduates to its teaching staff. This does not lead to openness or to the introduction of new and challenging ideas.

Much was made of the 'transparency' of the University as a quality to be commended – staff working in offices with windows that are open to the world. But such transparency is also carried forward into the examination process. It does seem to me that in a small university where the staff know the students, there is a risk of lack of objectivity if students' examinations are not anonymous. I heard that examiners are brought in from other universities in an attempt to guarantee standards and quality, and this is to be commended, but it does not alter the fact that there is a risk to standards and quality in a small university where the students will be known to their staff. This applies, naturally, to small institutions and perhaps even more precisely to private institutions where there are good commercial reasons for students to perform well.

The University runs a dedicated office to advise students on careers and future prospects. This is run by an individual who is enthusiastic, ambitious, and well qualified, although it did not seem that she had had particular training as a careers officer. Not all students use the service although some may refer to it on the web – but no figures of such usage were available. There was very little recent documentation in this small office and some of it was badly out of date. The office keeps a register of first destinations but the ambition of the director of the office would be to make contact with a much greater percentage of the students of the university. This office also assists students in the presentation of CVs and, oddly perhaps, in the completion of Erasmus forms. The University

might want to develop this area of activity when finances allow, to increase the staff involved with it, and to create a genuine careers library where students can research further opportunities and appropriate career choices.

As a general conclusion I would make the following comments:

In 20 years of activity the University has developed into a valuable institution that makes a genuine contribution to the education and life of the community. It has produced graduates who are committed and loyal to the institution and who act as willing ambassadors. The atmosphere in the university is warm and hospitable. There are some good examples to mention:

- the state of the building that is clean, warm and comfortable;
- peer review of teaching is compulsory and supportive, leading to teaching improvement and effective mentoring;
- staff and students are open and communicative; they talk willingly in support of the University.

However, and it may be that the self-evaluation document provides evidence for this, the University, and perhaps its students, are not able to be truly self-critical. It is rightly proud of its achievements but it does need to stop and take stock of what may be the next steps on the road to improvement:

- strategic thinking: what are the next steps? Which universities do we want as partners?
- How are we going to raise our research profile? How can we move from being a good teaching institution to one where research is a major and daily preoccupation? One where there are areas of excellence – in short, for what will Andrei Saguna be known in Romania, in Europe, in the

world. It must move to define its research strengths and to create the time for research to take place.

- One suggestion I would make, when finances allow it, is to develop a highly professional and supportive administration: dedicated staff working on careers, on research, on quality assurance. It does not make sense to use highly qualified teaching and research staff for administrative work that is not their speciality. A major research institution will have a larger and better-stocked library.
- The University is keen to have an international reputation and it takes time to invite dignitaries to come and speak to its students – all this is fine. But it needs also to attract top class researchers who would be willing to spend a short time at the University, talking to staff and students.
- It needs to develop an international relations strategy that fulfills the mission of the university – to seek out partners of the highest quality for the benefit of research and teaching links. And it needs to keep such partnerships under constant review – are they worth having, what do they bring to the University? Would it be worth, when finances allow, having a dedicated international office which would administer the work and which would manage the operation effectively?
- The University needs to think innovatively about teaching – to consider the Bologna principles which I have not heard mentioned at any time here; some students did say they would like more research-led teaching – how is student-centred learning to be taken forward, so that students

become independent learners and thinkers and, as a result, become more attractive to potential employers.

- The student voice here does not seem to be very loud; the University might want to develop a stronger partnership with the student body in order to take full advantage of the energy and ideas of its students.
- In other Universities and in other countries there is much good practice – programmes need to be reviewed regularly bringing in outside expertise.
- A small university is fragile and must take full advantage of all opportunities to increase its profile, to strengthen its position, and to make its mark on the educational landscape – people should be saying what is distinctive about this university – employers did not know, neither did the students – the university should define its uniqueness and make it public.

Malcolm Cook, 21 January 2012

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Malcolm Cook', written in a cursive style.