Institutional Evaluation Programme

Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities

"Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Târgu Jiu

EVALUATION REPORT

October 2013

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Table of contents

1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of "Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Târgu Jiu. The evaluation took place in 2013 in the framework of the project "Ready for innovating, ready for better serving the local needs - Quality and Diversity of the Romanian Universities", which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

The evaluations are taking place within the context of major reforms in the Romanian higher education system, and specifically in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education and the various related normative acts.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of an overall reform, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

1.1. The Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:
- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:
- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management

- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2. "Constantin Brâncuşi" University's profile

1.2.1 "Constantin Brâncuşi" University (CBU), Târgu Jiu, is a small university founded in 1992, although a university presence was first established in Târgu Jiu in 1972 under the umbrella of the University of Craiova. For the 2012/2013 academic year the university records a student population of 3 904, most of them on Bachelors' programmes. Around twenty per cent are on Masters' programmes while a handful of students are registered on PhD programmes. The university is prominent in local and regional development and it is the ambition of the CBU management to achieve recognition as "the most important institution of Gorj County".

1.3. The evaluation process

1.3.1 The self-evaluation process was undertaken by:

Mihai Cruceru, PhD, Professor Engineer (Vice-Rector for Research), (Chair)

Florin Ciofu, PhD, Engineer, Lecturer (Head of the Quality Department), (Secretary)

Liviu Marius Cirtina, PhD, Professor Engineer (Vice-Rector for Resources)

Stefan Sorinel Ghimisi, PhD, Professor Engineer (Chancellor of the Senate)

Marian Vintilescu, Engineer (Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration)

Luminita Georgeta Popescu, PhD, Professor Engineer (Dean, Faculty of Engineering)

Gabriela Ana Babucea, PhD, Professor (Dean, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration)

Monica Delia Bica, PhD, Professor (Dean, Faculty of Physical Education, Letters and Kinetic-theraphy)

Cornelia Tomescu Dumitrescu, PhD, Associate Professor (Faculty of International Relations, Law and Administrative Sciences)

Flavius Marcau, Student Member of the Senate

1.3.2 The self-evaluation report (SER) of the "Constantin Brâncuşi" University, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in April 2013. The visits of the evaluation team to "Constantin Brâncuşi" University took place in May 2013 and July 2013, respectively. In between the visits the university provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

1.3.3 A number of the annexes and most of the additional material were submitted in Romanian. No optional documents were posted on the IEP electronic platform. The team learnt that the SER had been written in Romanian and then translated into English. All the interviews during the team's two visits (management, academic staff and stakeholders) required interpretation, with the exception of meetings with students and a meeting on internationalisation strategy.

1.3.4 The evaluation team (hereinafter named "the team") consisted of:
- Professor Maria Helena Nazaré, formerly Rector of the University of Aviero, Portugal, team chair
- Professor Marián Dzimko, formerly Vice-Rector, University of Žilina, Slovakia
- Professor Roland Pelurson, Vice-President of Grenoble University, France
- Mr Tanel Sits, student member, University of Tallinn, Estonia (for first visit)
- Ms Asnate Kažoka, student member, Riga Technical University, Latvia (for second visit)
- Dr Raymond Smith, formerly Academic Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator

Approach to the IEP at "Constantin Brâncuşi" University

1.3.5   The composition of the Self-Evaluation Group (SEG) had been approved by the Senate and the Board of Directors. It comprised the two vice-rectors, chancellor of the Senate, deans and two other members of faculty staff, head of the quality department (secretary), and a student Senate representative. The SEG was chaired by the vice-rector for research. From discussions with the SEG, it appeared to the team that the development of the SER had been conducted as a largely top-down process. The SEG had shared the task of writing the SER and also undertaken the underlying SWOT analysis; the team noted, however, that members of the SEG appeared hesitant about the precise ownership of some sections of the SER. Members of the SEG had read each other's sections and then, following agreed revisions, the draft SER was sent out for consideration by staff in faculties. This involvement took the form of a number of meetings at each of which a member of the SEG was also present. The team understood that comments made by staff during these meetings were considered before the SER was finalised.

1.3.6   It was not clear how many university staff had been actively involved in the self-evaluation exercise although the team formed the view that there was little direct involvement of staff outside the SEG; students told the team that, while they were aware of the SER, they had not been involved in the process. The SEG justified this approach to developing the SER by stressing the fact that members of the group possessed significant experience and knowledge of the university.

1.3.7   The team found little evidence of the SER being owned by the wider university. In the view of the team, this absence of collegial engagement reflected a lack of a healthy academic discourse within the institution on key issues and about future direction. In particular, the team considered that the methodology adopted for the SWOT analysis did not exploit the opportunities of this exercise and, as a result, there was an imbalance in the outcomes. Some of the areas identified as strengths lacked credibility, and weaknesses did not match some of the areas that, in the view of the team, needed to be addressed by the university. For example, the university sees its "modern research infrastructure" as a strength; the team found no evidence to support this claim. The team was advised that the SWOT analysis had been informed by achievements and shortcomings linked to the most recent Strategic Plan and

that it also drew on an analysis of the outcomes from the 2012 operational plan. The Operational Plan for 2013 had been amended as a result of the SWOT exercise. The team noted these comments but found it difficult to establish any concrete examples of how this process had influenced decision-making or changes in policy or practice, particularly as the 2012 operational plan was not made available to the team despite being requested as part of the additional information requirement.

1.3.8   In discussions with staff from faculties there was little, if any, dissent over the presentation of the university as articulated in the SER. More broadly, it appeared that many in the university were prepared to passively accept the management's view presented in the SER. In discussions with faculty senior managers and academic staff there was no articulation of the need for a comprehensive change agenda as a response to the various challenges facing the university. The team noted that in many of the meetings held during the two visits to the university the same staff members were often in attendance and made key contributions to the discussions. This led the team to believe that the university had prepared set responses in advance of the meetings. In summary, the IEP process appeared to have suffered from an over-reliance on a few key senior individuals in the university and, as a consequence, it had not generated an open and critical analysis of the issues facing the university. In the view of the team this was a lost opportunity.

2.   Governance and institutional decision-making

Strategic direction

2.1   A Strategic Plan (2012-2016) is in place. A general objective is articulated as follows:

> "Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Târgu Jiu assumes in the next period, a fundamental role for the research development and the promotion of scientific research and innovation, the orientation towards the needs of society and European trends; the harmonization of the educational process with European guidelines and adapting the educational offer to meet labor market and demographic trends; increasing institutional capacity, prerequisite for improving the quality of the educational processes of the university; a strategic management approach in order to strengthen the position of

"Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Târgu Jiu regionally and nationally and develop the cooperation with foreign universities and fully integrate the university in academic programs at European and global level."

Perhaps of more significance in relation to intended strategic direction is the statement in the SER that CBU starts from the premise that "a university cannot matter in the institutional space specific to higher education, *unless it is visible in research*".

2.2   The university did not comment directly to the team on its classification as an education-centred public university within the Romanian higher education sector. In a number of meetings the emphasis was very much on the development of research; however, the team found that the priorities for research were not articulated in a consistent way. In addition there were few, if any, pointers as to how this step change in research performance might be achieved. Indeed, the university had faced some damage to its reputation in 2009 when the ARACIS commission re-evaluating a group of ten universities, downgraded the status of CBU from *High Level of Trust* to *Trust.* The team understood from the university that the criteria applied by ARACIS had changed since the original evaluation in 2007, and that CBU had met all the recommendations set down in 2007. However, the team also understood that weaknesses in research and research facilities had been key factors in the ARACIS decision in 2009. The university intended to submit a case to ARACIS for reviewing the *Trust* status in the near future. The team appreciated the importance of regaining *High Level of Trust* status but it was unable to adduce any evidence as to how such a case could be developed in a convincing way.

2.3   The university leadership summarised its vision for the next five years as:

i   The creation of a new perception within the academic community that allowed it to involve itself more significantly in research and education.
ii   The development of a new institutional culture with a focus on an awareness that the university needed to change.

These aspects formed a key part of the managerial offer which resulted in the election of the current rector. They were endorsed by the senior management

team and had also been encapsulated in the university's Strategic Plan, 2012-2016.

2.4   The team noted the development of the university's programme offering since 1992 and the re-organisation of faculties in recent years. At the time of this IEP evaluation five faculties were in place – Economics and Business Administration; Engineering; International Relations, Law and Administrative Sciences; Physical Education, Letters and Kinetic-therapy; and Medical Sciences, Arts and Educational Sciences. Given the importance attributed by the university to faculty management, the team was keen to understand the history and rationale for the changes in faculty organisation in the period since 2008. Indeed, as part of the additional information requested following the first visit the team had specifically asked for a written account of these faculty changes. Unfortunately this written account was omitted from the additional information sent to the team on 25 June. Just prior to the second visit a perfunctory and very general statement on faculty re-organisation was provided to the team. This statement did not support the team in any way in reaching a view on the efficacy of these organisational changes. In its statement the university had explained, in very general terms, that these changes had been guided by a streamlining of financial activity, comparability of specialisations, efficient use of the infrastructure and the requirements of the 2011 Law. The team learnt during a meeting with members of the Senate that there had been some disagreement in the university over the disposition of faculties. In the view of the team, however, the current position did not meet some of the factors that were meant to have guided the re-organisation of faculties. In particular, the Faculty of Medical Sciences, Arts and Educational Sciences was stated in the SER to have only 56 students and a staff list revealed that there were only three members of academic staff in the faculty.

2.5   There was a broad mix of subject disciplines and the team understood that the university was keen to maintain this balance of programmes. This approach was confirmed by the rector and the president of the Senate. In terms of the quality of programmes, the SER indicates that in the 2011 national ranking process for Masters' and Bachelors' specialisations, 1 was ranked in Category **A** (Accountancy); none in Category **B**; 8 in Category **C**; 5 in Category **D** and 6 in Category **E**.

2.6 The team was concerned to note that the number of students registering at the university has dropped significantly in recent years. For example, the total number of students fell from 5 201 in 2010/2011 to 3 904 in 2012/2013. This decline in student numbers was attributed to on-going demographic trends - something affecting universities throughout Romania - and it was indicated to the team that a number of programmes had been closed to safeguard the position of others. Some of this decline was also due to externally imposed staff-student ratios on distance learning programmes. The leadership was clear that the current student numbers were not optimal and that, consequently, the university would be seeking a step change to achieve a total of 5 000 students over the next three years. This was predicated on the introduction of eight new programmes including pre-school and primary pedagogy, sociology and kinetics-therapy. Demand for these new programmes had been considered in discussions with employers in the Consultative Council. The role of the Consultative Council is considered in paragraphs 5.1 - 5.3 below. There were also other subject areas that might be developed relating to open mining, agriculture and horticulture. The leadership of the university acknowledged that the increase to 5 000 students was a very challenging target and that it might not be achieved. The team also heard that the university did not have the staff with subject expertise to deliver the new proposed programmes but that it had reached agreement with the University of Bucharest for a number of professors to work part-time at CBU to teach these new programmes.

2.7 While the university leadership accepted that there were funding challenges facing the university - linked to the significant decrease in student numbers - it was underlined that the university was protected to some extent by the numbers of students that paid their own fees (60%). This made the university less vulnerable to the vagaries of student numbers allocated by the government. However, the team was hampered in coming to a precise view on the university's financial position because of a lack of reliable data.

2.8 In the SER the university recognises the challenges from other academic institutions in the Oltenia region. In response it sees its short-term strategy as "train[ing] all students as professionals in order to satisfy the

local/regional/international needs, and to find jobs specific to their training in companies".

2.9 The urge to recalibrate the programme portfolio and thereby increase student numbers was viewed by the team as an understandable response by the university to its current challenges. And while strategies for meeting higher recruitment targets were still evolving, the team shared the leadership's view that such growth in student numbers was highly ambitious, not least because of competition from other universities in the Oltenia region. The team was also concerned that academic staff external to the university would be the key resource in delivering new programmes. In the view of the team, this was unlikely to either provide a strong foundation for the student experience or contribute to the achievement of key change ambitions mentioned by the leadership as being at the heart of his strategic vision.

2.10 As part of its SWOT analysis the university had identified as a weakness the absence of a marketing activity directed at attracting students from outside the local region. From this SWOT analysis there also appeared to be issues with a lack of quality candidates on some programmes and the continuance of some programmes despite a clear lack of student demand. This seemed to be at odds with the leadership's contention that the university was adept at analysing recruitment and performance on programmes and closing them as necessary.

2.11 As noted in paragraph 1.3.7 above, the university had, in many ways, missed the opportunity offered by the IEP process to undertake a thorough SWOT analysis, involving all internal and external stakeholders, underpinned by a commitment to a full and healthy debate and welcoming of views that challenged established wisdom. Wanting the university to fully grasp that opportunity, the team suggested that it set up a small group, under the leadership of the rector, to undertake a fresh and more realistic SWOT analysis, with an increased focus on opportunities. It would be essential that this group adopted an approach that guaranteed both depth and breadth in terms of stakeholder involvement – internally and externally.

2.12   On the basis of its discussions regarding strategic direction, the team felt strongly that the university needed to reconsider its current Strategic Plan which had been largely developed around a list of ambitions. To this end, the university should embrace the new SWOT analysis mentioned in 2.10 above, and actively encourage the engagement of the whole academic and administrative community in the task of producing an updated and improved Strategic Plan. In particular, the university needed to reconsider its plans in respect of the predominance of research ambitions in its overarching strategy. In the view of the team the university should give serious consideration to the need for, and the opportunities offered by, the development of CBU as a university recognised for teaching excellence. This should be complemented by a clearer articulation of applied research priorities and these should be linked to the region.

Mission

2.13   The university's mission is described as education and research in order to generate and transfer knowledge to society through:

- creating and cherishing the values of culture and civilizations
- initial and continuous training at the university level for personal development, employability and satisfying the demand for competence in the socio-economic, administrative, cultural and educational environment
- scientific research, development, innovation and technology transfer, by individual and collective creativity in science, engineering and arts by providing performances, exploitation and dissemination of results.

This is enshrined in the University Charter, approved by the Senate (2012), which the university also regards as meeting the requirements of national legislation.

Governance, management and institutional decision-making

2.14   The managerial structure, stated in the SER as determined by law, involves a hierarchy of Senate; Board of Directors; Faculty Councils and Department Councils. The rector chairs the Board of Directors. It is noted in the SER that the president of the Senate is considered "as the permanent guest at the meetings of the Board of Directors". The team noted that the management team at the university had only been in place since May 2012. The former

Rector (2006-2012), Professor Adrian Gorun, is now the President of the Senate. It was understood by the team that Professor Gorun had initially put himself forward as a candidate for rector but that he had subsequently withdrawn his candidature. The explanation given to the team was the lack of compliance with the requirements of the 2011 Law.

2.15   One of the strengths identified by the university in terms of governance is the "decentralizing [of] responsibilities, increasing the responsibility for making decisions at each component level…" and this is linked to reliability and transparency in decision-making. The team did not find credible evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, there appeared to be undue power and influence vested in the Senate. This was evident from the scheduling of monthly meetings of the Senate. The university maintained that this approach was determined by national law and offered an effective model for governing and managing the university; the team felt, however, that the university had interpreted the 2011 Law in a very conservative way and had subsequently developed the university Charter in a narrow and restrictive way. The team pointed to the arrangements in other universities as clear evidence that far greater flexibility existed within the law to balance the roles of Senate and the Executive than was being recognised at CBU.

2.16   The team notes that this imbalance of power and accountability impacts in two very significant ways. First, the reduction of the role of the Executive (rector and senior management team) to one of largely operational delivery, and secondly, the channelling of decision-making to the Senate in a way that removed any real sense of responsibility and accountability from other levels of the university. Instead of vesting power and authority in the Executive for the overall management of the university, the current arrangements seemed geared to a stifling micro-management by the Senate. This was evidenced by the role of the various Senate Speciality Commissions to scrutinise, in considerable detail, performance in the university. In the view of the team the urgently needed change agenda for the university required greater scope for leadership and direction by the rector and his senior team. This should be supported by the creation of a core of professional leaders in the wider university.

2.17   The team had a number of meetings with senior faculty managers, academic staff and students and, in terms of governance, found little evidence of faculties being at the forefront of devolved decision-making. To some extent, this could be attributed to a series of faculty re-organisation in recent years. The senior managers in the Faculty of International Relations, Law and Administrative Sciences had only been in post for one month. More often, however, comments by staff suggested that they were distant from real decision-making and, in some cases, were unsure or unclear about university policies — for example, the framework governing research projects/overheads policy; the norms for teaching contact hours and the process for determining budgeted student numbers. The team noted that the key discussions in Faculty Councils involved (1) educational plans (2) staffing (including vacancies).

2.18   The university has a strong stated commitment to the involvement of students in decision-making and a student was a member of the SEG. The SER highlights the existence of a Student Representative Council (subordinate to the Senate Office) and the involvement of student representatives (25%) in the Senate and in Faculty Councils. In addition, one student representative is a member of the Board of Directors. However, the team did not find any significant examples of how, in practice, the student voice is heard on strategic matters. Students indicated that they exercise their voting rights in decision forums, but the team was also advised that the focus for student representatives are issues that impact on the student body in practical ways, for example, the allocation of scholarships. The development of the SER had not, it was understood, involved student focus groups. Indeed the SWOT analysis on the involvement of students in the institutional management of the university appeared to reflect the views of senior managers rather than students.

2.19   The team regarded the issues surrounding governance and institutional decision-making as key to the development of a mature university. There was a strongly held view by the team that the university needed to reassess and rebalance the relationship between the Senate and the Executive and also stimulate the wider engagement of staff and students in decision-making at all levels of the university. Clearly, it was important for the Senate to oversee the work of the Executive but this needed to be done in an appropriate way. A

Senate should not seek to act as an Executive. The rector and his senior management team needed to respond effectively to the many challenges facing the university and this required trust and belief in the judgment of the executive arm.

2.20   In the view of the team the current disposition of power, accountability and responsibility was likely to lead to, and reinforce, ineffective and inefficient decision-making within the institution. Issues such as student retention, progression and achievement and career outcomes were matters that were critical to the university. These issues needed to be owned by staff in faculties and departments and it was for the rector and his senior team to ensure that there were appropriate mechanisms in place to demonstrate institutional performance. This would not be best achieved through the work of a number of Senate commissions. It was for the Senate to seek re-assurance on these matters and, with the Rectorate, to determine how that re-assurance might be secured. In turn, the Senate needed to concentrate on fulfilling its key role as the long strategic planning body for the university.

2.21   In summary, there appeared to be little open acceptance in the university that it needed to change current approaches or mind-sets. The team wondered whether the required paradigm shift could occur when there seemed to be significant organisational barriers to such change. The current relationship between the Executive and the Senate appeared to the team to offer reinforcement of past practice rather than an agenda for the future and to blur, in an unhelpful way, governance and leadership roles in the university. In the view of the team, the best way to ensure that an appropriate balance of power existed between the Senate and the Executive, and also avoid the risk of stagnation in decision-making, was to revise the university Charter.

3.   Teaching and learning

3.1   The components of the three-tier Bologna system are present in the academic structure at CBU. As the SER notes, however, the academic autonomy of the university is constrained by ARACIS (Romanian Quality Assurance Agency) with all study programmes having to be accredited or authorised by ARACIS and comply with nationally determined academic standards and criteria. The university stressed in a number of meetings with the team that staff ability to

innovate in learning and teaching was constrained by the extent of this prescription by ARACIS.

3.2   In the SER the university describes two stages of "professional activity" for students on their programmes: (1) common training within lectures, seminars, laboratories and projects (2) individual private study based on the course requirements. While there are references to students having access to an online eLearning platform and general support facilities, little is said about the broad approach to learning and teaching. For the most part, the focus is on methods of assessing the quality processes underpinning learning and teaching. Again this failure to innovate is attributed to the need to adhere to nationally (ARACIS) established norms.

3.3   When asked about the predominance of programmes in the C, D and E categories across the university, academic staff stressed that the criteria used by ARACIS were largely based on research outputs in the subject specialisations. However, the university had achieved an A ranking in accountancy and the team could find no evidence that this was the result of research performance. This external scrutiny did not, therefore, offer the team any great insight into the approach to learning and teaching. During some of its meetings with faculty staff and students, the team noted the view that some professors were regarded as self-centred rather than student-centred and this was also reflected in some of the commentary on staff weaknesses in the SER, especially amongst staff with higher degrees "who do not want promotion any more".

3.4   There was evidence of external, company involvement with curriculum development although it was not clear how far this was embedded in quality processes as opposed to informal contact between employers and professors. In these circumstances there was a risk that some programmes would become too closely allied to the needs of a particular company with concomitant risks to the academic integrity of the programmes. During meetings with the team students were, however, positive about the strong links with local employers and they confirmed that this led to good internship opportunities. In addition, the team found evidence of effective supervision of internships both by the university and the linked companies. The team also noted that data provided by faculties showed relatively positive outcomes in terms of employment

destinations. In the team's view, the university's capacity to consider this data at an institutional level would be aided by the introduction of new software to track employment destinations. More broadly, it was important that the university adopted a common framework for gathering information and data on employment outcomes and the tracking of graduates in their careers. This would allow the current work of faculties to be taken forward in a more strategic way.

3.5 A view was expressed by some academic managers and staff, and highlighted as threats in the SER, that the lack of new blood in the academic community and the barriers to promotion were continuing to have a negative impact on the student experience of learning and teaching. As a result, CBU had looked to improve the training of existing staff through the support of the Department for Distance Learning. It was not clear to the team, however, whether the current arrangements for continuing professional development included the training of academic staff to be educators. There would be real benefit from an institutional approach that allowed for the development of educational skills; however, the list of staff training provided by the university covering the period 2010-2013, revealed that the majority of programmes involved small numbers of attendees and very limited coverage of pedagogy. While the team understood that the quality of learning and teaching might be affected by resource constraints, a more systematic and targeted programme of staff development could add real value without being a significant drain on scarce resources. This might also help tackle motivation issues amongst some staff.

3.6 The university had not developed an institutional learning and teaching strategy although there is a section in the Strategic Plan, 2012-2016 setting out ambitions in this area. In the view of the team, however, a properly formulated learning and teaching strategy could help counter some of the perceived constraints relating to national policies. Such a strategy could highlight the opportunities for adopting best practice and a broader enhancement agenda. It could also help establish a new academic focus on learning and teaching, articulating policies rather than worrying about bureaucratic requirements. At the level of particular initiatives such a strategy could, *inter alia*, help to promote technology-aided learning; support

innovation in assessment; tackle plagiarism; increase access to learning resources; and develop the curriculum to improve graduate transferrable skills, especially team work and practical projects, areas that were mentioned as important in meetings with students. Other graduate attributes could also be highlighted, for example language skills and information literacy. Another more thematic approach would be to hold an internal learning and teaching conference, facilitated by academic leaders in pedagogy, and focused, for example, on the use of problem-based learning (PBL) in the delivery of the curriculum.

3.7   The team mentioned a well-known and respected PBL model developed at Aalborg University in Denmark that offers students greater possibilities for independent learning to achieve knowledge and skills at a high academic level. In this model many students have the possibility of working with the business community to solve real-life problems. This could work well with the university's current arrangements for internships. PBL also supports students' learning, including the analysis of problems, how to work in a results-oriented way and how to work successfully within a team. This approach could act as a point of reference for discussions within the university.

3.8   The team noted the large decrease in associated didactic staff (from 136 in 2010-2011 to 50 in 2012-2013) and wondered how this teaching workload was now being covered. During the same period the number of full-time teaching staff had also fallen from 155 to 145. The university stated that the fall in student numbers had played a part in these staff reductions and that, historically, student groups had been small. While staff-students ratios remained high the team was concerned that the decrease in staff numbers had been very rapid and could be undermining the learning experience of students. The SER notes that there has been a reduction in the number of lectures/seminars and that these have been replaced by a greater focus on individual learning or team study. This is presented as being beneficial to students; however, the team was concerned that this was simply a pragmatic response to the significant reduction in associated didactic staff.

3.9   In meetings with the team, students expressed general satisfaction with their learning experience and confirmed that they were able to cope with the demands of their teaching schedules. Some students indicated that they did

not need to devote time to private study if they attended all their lectures and seminars. The team was concerned, however, that this form of learning and teaching was too close to the learning patterns that they would have experienced at high school. Programmes included a high number of subject areas and also had high contact hours through lectures, seminars and laboratory sessions. This might offer a degree of reassurance to students entering the university but a consequence of this could be their ability to develop as independent learners being undermined. In turn, this would damage students' employment prospects in an ever more competitive job market. The team, therefore, urges the university to explore the possibility of alternative approaches to learning and teaching such as PBL and also to explore creative ways in which it can adapt programmes within the constraints set down by ARACIS.

3.10   The team understood from the SER and its discussions with staff and students that Masters' students had access to learning materials through a basic online platform while Bachelors' students received lecture notes by email. In respect of Bachelor programmes, one student in the programme group (from 20-25 in size) is elected to act as a point of contact with the professor and distribute lecture notes to the rest of the group. Students use their personal email accounts for this purpose as the university does not operate its own email system for students. The team learnt that distance learning students had access to a more effective Moodle eLearning platform; the university indicated that this platform could not, however, be shared with full-time students because it ran counter to ARACIS policy. The university was committed to introducing a virtual learning environment (VLE) for full-time students, although this would be hosted separately from the one for distance learning students. The team was very supportive of this initiative and, notwithstanding the position with ARACIS, encouraged the university to consider how far this could be achieved without duplication of systems.

4.   Research

4.1   CBU embeds research and knowledge transfer into many aspects of its mission and strategic goals. As noted in paragraph 2.1 research is seen as a *sine qua non* of the university's credibility. During the course of its visits the team found it difficult to establish the overall direction of research in the university,

the ways in which it was organised and ways in which research output was funded and evaluated. In the SER there is reference to "The Strategy regarding the Scientific Research" approved by the CBU Senate. This strategy document was sent to the team as part of the additional information request following the first visit. However, the team was surprised to hear from the vice-rector (research) in one of its final meetings that the strategy was four years old and that a number of the general objectives set out in that strategy had now been achieved.

4.2 In terms of the number of research grants obtained through open competition the picture appeared quite volatile (40 in 2008 falling to 22 in 2009 and 36 in 2011 falling to 18 in 2012). There had also been a significant dip in the value of grants between 2011 and 2012. The number of ISI recognised articles had shown good growth between 2009 and 2011 but had started to level off in 2012.

4.3 The team understood that the Engineering Faculty contributed significantly to the research activity of the university and this is seen as a strength by the university. However, the SER notes the lack of common research projects across faculties and the absence of research activity in some faculties. These weaknesses are reinforced by the number of professors who do not achieve minimum levels of research activity.

4.4 It was explained during the meeting with top management staff that the strategic objectives for research were initiated in the faculties and then scrutinised by the Board of Directors before being approved by the Senate. The team spent some time discussing priority areas for research with a range of senior staff. While general areas emerged such as energy and renewable resources, there was a strong tendency for more detailed descriptions of research priorities to be variable and inconsistent. Following a meeting on research strategy the team received a list of main priorities as follows:
- Exploitable Resources in the conditions of globalisation
- Development Economy
- Development Administration
- Political Power and Development
- Cultural Premises of Development

Most of these priorities had six or more sub-headings setting out specific areas for research. The team considered this presentation of priorities as overly ambitious.

4.5 The institutional focus for this research is the Institute of Research Development and Innovation (IRDI) established in 2011 and headed by Professor Andrei Marga. IRDI is also responsible for co-ordinating the work of the various faculty research centres. In organisational terms, however, this Institute is subordinate to the Research and Development Department. From its various discussions with senior staff the team came away with the view that the IRDI was intended to be the driving force behind the university's research development. The appointment of iconic figures of Romanian higher education to the top management of this institute was presented to the team as salutary in this regard.

4.6 Resources to support research priorities were allocated according to a university-level methodology. The Senate validated types of projects to be supported within the university. The Board of Directors had autonomy to authorise projects below the value of 50,000 euros, but all decisions taken by the Rectorate were also scrutinised by the Senate. Some of the surplus from projects was re-invested in infrastructure, especially in the Engineering Faculty.

4.7 Only six PhD students (all in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration) are shown as registered in 2012/2013. This is down from ten in 2011/2012. The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration hosts the university's only accredited doctoral school. It was not clear what arrangements were in place for supporting these students or their supervisors or for training new supervisors. There is no discussion in the SER of the PhD student experience or the nature of the support available for such students, although there is passing reference to doctoral schools as one of the organisational components established through the university's Charter. It was clarified to the team during its second visit that the IRDI, working with faculties, is responsible for developing additional doctoral schools that could be put forward for external accreditation. The first priority is a doctoral school for sociology. However, from the team's perspective, it was difficult to understand how a healthy research degree environment could be sustained with such low numbers. Equally, little or no account seemed to have been

taken of competition for new PhD students from other universities in the region or nationally.

4.8 In the university's summary of strengths it comments that it has a "modern research infrastructure adapted to the faculty specificity". The team visited some areas of the university but found no evidence to support this statement. The team, however, did note that, as a result of a large research contract awarded to the Faculty of Engineering, resources were being invested in equipment to improve the university's research standing. Other work was also taking place to support research. In particular, the university was pro-active in developing links with large local companies, largely through the work of faculties and was becoming more active in exploring external funding opportunities. As mentioned in paragraph 4.5 the IRDI is now seen as being central to the co-ordination of these activities.

4.9 The team came to the conclusion that many of the key building blocks for a sustainable research environment were under-developed and that no realistic strategy existed for developing an appropriate research capacity at the university. In the view of the team it was essential that the university develop an up-to-date research strategy that clearly articulated research priorities. It is noteworthy that the existing strategy makes no mention of such priorities. The new research strategy should also reflect a reduction in the number of priorities so that scarce resources could be used more effectively. In the view of the team the university needed to focus on local opportunities with business, including SMEs, and using such collaboration as a way of increasing visibility. Equally some of the organisational change in the research area, in particular the IRDI oversight of research centres, should be used to enhance inter-disciplinary research, including the social sciences.

5. Service to society

5.1 The team discussed the university's relationship with the city and the wider region in a meeting with senior local government leaders and officials and employers. There is limited commentary in the university's SER on collaboration with the regional and local economy or broader social and cultural relations with the local community. However, the team was impressed by the numbers of external stakeholders who attended the IEP meeting.

Equally, the comments from those attending the meeting were overwhelmingly positive in their support for the university and it appeared that this support had been on-going since the formation of the university in 1992. The university has established a Consultative Council comprising local and regional stakeholders and employers.

5.2   The SER states that the Consultative Council has a "counselling role in the elaboration of major decisions for the university; the strategy for education, the strategy for research, the investment strategy, the strategy for institutional development." The Council works in partnership with the university's Senate and is seen as being of value by employers. The president of Gorj County, however, described the main purpose of the Consultative Council as helping to ensure that CBU students were prepared for the labour market, keeping in step with other universities in Romania and, indeed, universities in the wider Europe. And in another section of the SER, the university defines the main mission of the Council as participating in "the improvement of the graduates' quality, by suggestions to adapt the study programs to the requirements imposed by the labour markets".

5.3   Given the importance of the Consultative Council it seemed odd to the team that this group had not been involved in the development of the SER or the associated SWOT analysis. This could easily have been achieved by a stakeholder analysis and the use of a focus group for employers. The SER states that during 2012 over 70 protocols were in place with economic agents, agencies, and local public authorities designed to develop the practical skills of students. There was evidence of this collaboration during the meeting with external stakeholders. For example, the Prosecutor attached to the Gorj tribunal court spoke of formal and informal meetings with staff and students and support to improve work experience. Other contacts, however, seemed more informal and, in terms of input into programme development, revolved around personal acquaintance with individual professors. On the whole, employers indicated that they were content with the quality of graduates. One stakeholder's view, however, stressed the need for a mandatory university entry examination and a greater practical element in programmes without reducing the coverage of theory. When the team challenged this overwhelmingly positive view of the quality of CBU graduates by reference to

the downgrading of the university's **High Trust** status, a view emerged from some stakeholders that this assessment was very subjective and that they hoped the IEP process would provide a greater degree of objectivity.

5.4 There was an acknowledgement that competition in the university sector was growing, not least from private universities, and at one point CBU had been encouraged to join a consortium of universities. CBU did not pursue this path and it was recognised that there was a need to improve the connection between pre-university education and study at university and then subsequent entry into the employment market. External stakeholders were keen for the university to continue moving closer to regional/local government and companies but, on the whole, professed themselves satisfied with their relationship with the university.

5.5 The university's SWOT analysis on collaboration with the social-economic environment revealed a number of important strengths in this relationship including the partnership with the Oltenia Energetic Centre. In general, the team was able to note a good range of projects with local companies and the desire of the university to act as a problem solver for a variety of organisations. Senior faculty staff were clearly at the forefront of this personal contact with the managers of local companies and organisations but the team could not establish whether this was part of a systematic approach to partnership in the university.

5.6 The team believed that there were opportunities to build on this platform of collaboration with the local region. While clearly there were strengths in the personal contacts established by Deans and others, the university was encouraged to complement this at the university level by the creation of an office that could act as a specific "entry point" for organisations seeking to collaborate with the university or simply enquiring about staff expertise and capacity.

5.7 Overall, the team was convinced that the university could build on its current position in a number of ways. First, it could explore the possibility of gaining subject specific certification of laboratories as both a service to the local economy and a valuable source of income to the university. Secondly, it could build on the experience and success of innovative projects such as the

recycling of waste materials. Thirdly, it could further develop multi-disciplinary research as a way of serving local and regional needs and the co-ordination of faculty research centres through the IRDI could help this development.

6.   Quality culture

6.1   In section 5 of the SER the university sets out its processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of its academic provision. Apart from a list of documents relating to the Quality Management System (Appendix 14) no supporting documents for this area were made available to the IEP team in advance of the first visit. The university stresses in the SER, however, that there has been "a quality culture for many years" and that it has a professional management system that is able to generate information on institutional and local faculty performance.

6.2   The key body charged with evaluating the university's academic performance is the Commission for Quality Evaluation and Provision (CEAC). This commission is "subordinated to the University Senate". The Commission is supported by the Department for Quality Provision (DAC) and is overseen by the vice-rector responsible for quality. The remit of CEAC is very wide-ranging from scrutinising faculty educational plans to formulating suggestions for quality improvement to initiating analyses of faculty performance. In addition, the university has established an Internal Auditors Group (IAG) to monitor performance on study programmes. The group comprises 17 professors drawn from each of the faculties. This group can propose "corrective and preventive actions". It was not clear to the team how the work of the IAG fed into mainstream quality processes or how it related to the work of the Faculty Commissions for Quality Evaluation and Provision which also have a programme evaluation role.

6.3   The evaluation of academic staff performance is achieved through (1) student evaluation of their professors through a questionnaire (2) what is known as "collegial evaluation" of professors (3) a yearly management evaluation of professors by their departmental director. The director's report integrates all the elements of evaluation.

6.3 The university acknowledges that student feedback mechanisms suffer from poor student response rates and this extends to a lack of student interest in their learning environment. The DAC undertakes the analysis of student questionnaires and then submits them to CEAC. Deans and professors are then asked to respond to the analysis. The team noted, however, that when asked about the impact of these questionnaires, some students stated that they saw little improvement in the approach of their professors. It was also not clear to the team what feedback was given to students on this analysis and how the university ensured that there was an appropriate response from professors to the feedback. The team also noted that, as part of an Action Plan, the university would be implementing an online evaluation system to encourage increased student participation in the evaluation of professors and the learning environment. This system would also contribute to improved data accuracy.

6.4 The team did not form a positive opinion on the current questionnaire given to students to comment on the performance of their lecturers. The questions were limited in terms of both scope and sophistication. This is particularly unfortunate at a time when throughout Europe there is increasing student focus on individual lecturer performance. A new online evaluation system would not offer benefits if the underlying approach remained flawed. It was a concern to the team that the questionnaires were only completed by successful students who had a 100% attendance record. The DAC analysis of these questionnaires (semester 1 of the 2011/2012 academic year) was also viewed as somewhat perfunctory. This might partly be attributed to the outcomes. Of 121 teachers evaluated over 86% were regarded as "very good" while over 11% were regarded as "good". In addition, the team noted that the collegial evaluation of academic staff (peer review) in 2011/2012 produced an outcome of "distinction" for all professors. The DAC analysis concluded that the results "confirm[ed] the efforts of the academic community of CBU regarding the increase of the quality of the educational processes developed at present". In the SER the results of the peer review are only qualified by a comment that the evaluation had been made with "a certain subjectivity". The team could not view these outcomes with equanimity. The measures of teaching staff performance and student views of their learning experience lacked differentiation and were therefore bound to result in outcomes that

suggested that staff performance was almost uniformly "good" / "very good"/"distinction". In the medium-term the likely outcome of this approach would be stagnation with no platform for staff improvement.

6.5   Data on student attrition ("abandonment") was provided by the university but progression and achievement data were not. The SER does not comment on these data although the abandonment rate in some faculties is shown to be very high and the university average for students leaving their course in the first year was 20% in 2011/12. In particular, the team noted that the Engineering Faculty suffered a first year abandonment rate of 29% in 2009/2010, 28% in 2010/2011 but that this rate had dropped to 18% in 2011/2012. It was important for the university to openly demonstrate an understanding of the reasons behind these high drop-out rates and also engage students in a discussion on why this was occurring. For example, was it good students who were leaving and, if so, why? Were students entering programmes without the relevant subject background and, if so, what action was being taken to tackle this? Were some students leaving for economic reasons and, if so, how many were self-funding students? The team found no evidence of a systemic discourse on these matters. On the contrary, it found a degree of complacency amongst some staff who pointed to students' scoring of teaching staff as overwhelmingly positive.

6.6   In the meeting with the top management team, it was emphasised that the university felt it had developed an institutional culture of quality. However, the team concluded from its meetings and the information provided that the university was, in fact, following a narrow and restricted view of quality culture with an emphasis on basic quality assurance procedures. External factors – the national law and government agencies — were seen as insuperable barriers to the enhancement of quality and it was of concern to the team that staff appeared unwilling to consider creative solutions to overcome these barriers.

6.7   There was also evidence that the existing arrangements in place to support the development of a quality culture – through faculties, CEAC, Senate – were failing to provide robust scrutiny of key indicators. Therefore, the university should explore international comparisons of quality – quality assurance,

quality enhancement and quality culture – which are used by higher education institutions in Europe with a view to a thorough revision of its current arrangements and the adoption of best practice.

7.   Internationalisation

7.1   The team was provided with a brief document setting out the university's internationalisation strategy. At the outset this strategy stresses the dangers of relative isolation from the wider world. As part of its strategic development CBU has prioritised links (40 in total) with other universities, predominantly in the European Union. The majority of these links are Erasmus partnerships and, according to the information provided to the team, are due to conclude in 2013. Activity in terms of staff and student mobility is very low. The university's international office is the focal point for these mobility arrangements and the team was impressed by the knowledge and commitment of the head of that office. There were no reported problems with the recording of ECTS results.

7.2   It was also clear from discussions on international matters that, whatever the ambitions in this area, the university was struggling to make progress. In the view of the team the lack of well-developed English language (and other language) skills amongst staff and students is a significant barrier to the university's international ambitions. This is recognised as a weakness in the SER. In general, CBU's internationalisation strategy did not appear to be at the forefront of staff considerations. As mentioned in paragraph 2.1 above, the overwhelming university pre-occupation is with research. Equally, staff were found to be far more inclined to comment on the local/regional dimension of the university as opposed to its international standing. As a consequence there is little sense of how international collaborations fit into wider strategic objectives; and although details on international activity (in many cases several years old) are set out over almost four pages of the SER, there is no information on how the benefits of these links were being evaluated.

7.3   In meetings with the team, students were generally enthusiastic about the value of international links and opportunities but, as mentioned in 7.1 above, in practice, there is very limited mobility through the ERASMUS programme. The team was interested to hear that there was considerable reluctance

amongst students to take up opportunities abroad. Even those that showed some initial interest would, subsequently, find reasons for not pursuing this interest. There were, it appeared, strong cultural reasons for staying at home and students would also claim that it was too expensive to study outside Romania. The lack of language skills were also a significant problem.

7.4   The international office had made considerable efforts to break down student resistance to engage with study outside Romania and there were organisational changes that have been put in place to allow a greater focus on this activity. However, although there had been a small increase in the anticipated numbers of students committing to the Erasmus exchanges in 2013, the overall picture remained far from positive. The team commented that in an age of globalisation, student opportunities for employment and personal development would be seriously hampered by a failure to explore these possibilities and communicate effectively in other languages.

7.5   The overall lack of progress in the international domain was a matter of concern to the team. Clearly, efforts were being made by staff in this area but it appeared to the team that this endeavour was badly in need of additional support. In the view of the team the Rectorate and Senate should provide a strong steer on policies designed to improve the university's position in relation to language skills and staff and student mobility. As part of this initiative the university should continue to encourage Romanian academic staff working in Europe and North America to return to the university as visiting professors. The university would also benefit from exploring a range of reciprocal arrangements in Europe and not just the Erasmus programme. These developments, and many others, were important if the university was not to suffer the isolation from the wider world referred to in its international strategy.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Universities in Europe are facing significant changes in the landscape of higher education and research. The strategic context is provided by the Lisbon Agenda and Europe 2020. There are higher expectations regarding the transparency of university governance and institutional performance combined with an intense competition amongst universities for talented staff and students. As a consequence, institutions are reviewing their capacities and coming under pressure to merge or form broader strategic alliances either regionally or globally. More widely, the economic crisis is reducing levels of funding while demographic decline is affecting most of Europe.

8.2 The team recognised that CBU was a relatively young university and that it had high ambitions to develop its capacity across the full range of activity, not least in the area of research. However, in moving forward the team felt that the university needed to approach its future with more realism and creativity. In first instance, the team believes that the university needs to open up a mature and open debate about its governance and institutional decision-making. In the view of the team the model operating in the university does not offer an effective and balanced platform for meeting the significant challenges facing the university both within Romania and in the wider Europe. The team understood that the university was content with its current arrangements. However, in the view of the team the maintenance of the *status quo* was unlikely to serve the best interests of the university; it was more likely to lead to stagnation and ineffective decision-making at a time when decisive and creative leadership was becoming ever more critical to survival in the higher education space.

8.3 The team concluded that the university should give very serious consideration to developing a reputation as a pre-eminent teaching university. This should be allied to a clear and well-focused applied research capability linked to the local region. This offered the opportunity of becoming a university for the region rather than another anonymous regional university.

9 Recommendations

Governance and institutional decision-making

9.1 Set up a small group, under the leadership of the rector, to undertake a fresh and more realistic SWOT analysis, with an increased focus on opportunities. It was essential that this group adopt an approach that guaranteed both depth and breadth in terms of stakeholder involvement – internally and externally.

9.2 Reconsider the current Strategic Plan, building on the new SWOT analysis, and actively encouraging the engagement of the whole academic community in these processes.

9.3 Ensure an appropriate balance of power between the Senate and the Executive and enshrine this in a new university charter.

9.4 Give serious consideration to the need and opportunity of becoming a university recognised for teaching excellence, strongly linked to the region and with an appropriate applied research capacity.

Teaching and learning

9.5 Consider introducing different approaches to learning. Such modernisation of pedagogic practice could, for example, be linked to the accelerated adoption of a virtual learning environment that allowed academic staff to interact with their students and students to interact with each other in different ways; this could also encourage greater innovation in assessment methods. In the future the university might want to consider adopting other approaches to learning such as problem-based learning.

9.6 Develop an integrated E-Platform that can serve the needs of all students.

9.7 Develop a learning and teaching strategy that helps highlight the opportunities for best practice and enhancement. Link this to staff development programme/events.

Research

9.8 Develop a revised research strategy.

9.9 Reduce the number of research priorities so that scarce resources can be used more effectively.

9.9 Focus on specific local opportunities with business, including SMEs, using such collaboration as a way of increasing visibility.

9.10 Enhance inter-disciplinary research, including social sciences, through effective coordination of faculty research centres.

Quality culture

9.11 Explore international comparisons of quality – quality assurance, quality enhancement and quality culture – which are used by higher education institutions in Europe with a view to revising its current arrangements and adopting best practice.

Service to society

9.12 Encourage the further development of business/industry links, through the creation of an office that can act as a specific "entry point" for organisations seeking to collaborate with the university.

9.13 Explore initiatives that might result in the subject specific certification of laboratories as a support to local and regional industry.

9.14 Build on the success of innovative projects such as the recycling of waste materials.

9.15 Further develop multi-disciplinary research as a way of serving local and regional needs. The coordination of faculty research centres could aid this development.

Internationalisation

9.16 The Rectorate and Senate should provide a strong steer on policies to improve the university's position in relation to language skills and staff and student mobility.

9.17 Continue to encourage Romanian academic staff working in universities in Europe, North America to act as visiting professors.

9.18 Consider exploring a range of reciprocal arrangements in Europe and not just Erasmus.

Note

On 29 July 2013 the Chair of the IEP Panel received, via the EUA offices in Brussels, a letter (dated 23 July 2013) from the rector of "Constantin Brâncuşi" University setting out the university's view that the relationship between the Senate and the Board of Directors was in accordance with Law no. 1/2011 on National Education.

The IEP team agreed that the views of the university, as set out in the rector's letter, should be noted at the end of this report.

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We are also very grateful to the staff, students and external stakeholders of the university who have spent time meeting us and helped us to understand the operation of the university.