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## **Institutional Evaluation Programme**

*Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and  
Innovation in Romanian Universities Project*

### **LUCIAN BLAGA UNIVERSITY, SIBIU**

#### ***EVALUATION REPORT***

*March 2013*

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Liliya Ivanova (for second visit)

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**Performance  
in Higher Education**





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## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu. The evaluation took place in December 2012 and February 2013 in the framework of the project "Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and Innovation in 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. Lucian Blaga University and the national context

Lucian Blaga University is located in Sibiu, capital city of the county bearing the same name, as well as historic capital of the German territory, former seat of Transylvanian governors during the Habsburg period. While there is a long history of higher education in the city, the university regards itself as a “new” university having been founded in its present guise in 1990.

The beginning of the higher education system in Sibiu extends back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A law academy and a theological school were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century while in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1969) the faculty of philology and history was set up in Sibiu, as a branch of the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj. The Sibiu Higher Education Institution was established in 1976 and it included faculties of philology and history, administrative law and mechanical engineering. This entity had a more circumscribed role during the late 1980s, but in March 1990 the government decreed the foundation of the University of Sibiu, as a public institution, with five faculties: letters, history and law; sciences; medicine; engineering; textile and food-processing technology. In 1991, the faculty of theology joined the University of Sibiu.

In May 1995, the University of Sibiu was granted the name of the distinguished Romanian writer and philosopher, Lucian Blaga. As is noted in the university’s self-evaluation document, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (LBUS) “owes its name to the outstanding personality of Lucian Blaga and his unequalled significance in Romanian culture, as well as his affiliation to the Transylvanian area and his connections with Sibiu”.



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As the self-evaluation report makes clear, the current context for higher education in Romania is established by the 2011 Law of National Education, which was designed to improve performance in both education and research areas. The university sees two important processes to be taken into account in this respect: the classification of universities into three categories and the establishment of a hierarchy of study programmes into five classes, followed by an international institutional evaluation process managed by an international agency (EUA). The classification process involved three categories; advanced research and teaching universities; teaching and scientific research universities; and teaching universities. Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu has been classified as a teaching and scientific research public university, and therefore entered the international evaluation process in the second round.

### 1.3. The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a team comprising the following:

Professor Livia Ilie, Vice-Rector, Organisational and Financial Strategy  
 Professor Claudiu Kifor, Vice-Rector for Research and Doctoral Studies  
 Associate Professor Marian Tiplic, Academic Vice-Rector  
 Associate Professor Ramona Todericiu, Deputy Administrative Director  
 Dr Daniela Preda, Director of International Relations Office  
 Professor Liviu Rosca, Dean, Faculty of Engineering  
 Associate Professor Silva Marginean, Faculty of Economic Sciences  
 Associate Professor Eva-Nicoleta Burdusel, Faculty of Letters and Arts  
 Assistant Professor Lucian Lobont, Quality Assurance Department  
 Associate Professor Horatiu Rusu, Research Department  
 Diana Lupu, Student, Faculty of Engineering  
 Marius Smarandoiu, Student, Faculty of Medicine

The self-evaluation report of the Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in November 2012. The visits of the evaluation team to Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu took place from 9 to 11 December 2012 and from 3 to 6 February 2013, respectively. In between the visits to Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.



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The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Professor Carles Solà, former Rector, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, Team chair
- Professor Jean-Pierre Gesson, former President, University of Poitiers, France
- Professor Karol Izydor Wysokinski, former Vice-Rector for Research and International Collaboration, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej (UMCS) Lublin, Poland
- Ms Camilla Georgsson, student, Linköping University, Sweden (for first visit)
- Ms Liliya Ivanova, student, University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria (for second visit)
- Dr Raymond Smith, former Academic Registrar, London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom, Team coordinator.

The team would like to thank the Rector, Professor Ioan Bondrea, and our institutional liaison, the Vice-Rector for Organisational and Financial Strategy, Professor Livia Ilie, for their considerable support in this IEP visit to Lucian Blaga University.

The team is very grateful to the staff and students of the university who have spent time meeting us and helped us to understand how the university operates. The team was very impressed with their enthusiasm and willingness to share their views and opinions.

## 2. Governance and institutional decision making

### Strategic direction

- 2.1 It was clear to the team that the university had approached this international evaluation process with serious intent. The university saw the benefits of such a self-evaluation process in the context of the need to respond to the on-going economic difficulties in Europe and the reform of the higher education system in Romania.
- 2.2 The university also saw the IEP as an opportunity to drive forward a range of organisational and financial imperatives. The team noted that the new management team at the university had only been in place since May 2012 and there appeared to be strong backing for the new rector and a willingness amongst the wider senior management group to address the need for better communication and transparency in the policies and operation of the university. Both staff and students confirmed that there was a greater degree of openness in the university over the last 10 months and the team noted with interest the rector's initiative "LBUS Dialogues". Every week a department/faculty presents its achievements to the wider university and the rector sees this as an impetus for bridge-building across subject disciplines in teaching and a platform for multi-disciplinary research. The team felt that this was an important dimension in the university's development.
- 2.3 In the meetings with staff from faculties it was not clear how many of them had been actively involved in the self-evaluation exercise although it was evident that, on the whole, they were aware of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER); it was freely available online and there was a view expressed in some faculties that the report broadly matched reality. Amongst some staff, however, there was a feeling that the reality of the situation at the university was somewhat better than how it was presented in the SER. The team had the impression that the consultation exercise that was part of the self-evaluation exercise had only been partly successful and that some voices in some faculties had not been heard. In a broader sense it appeared that many in the university were still at arm's length from the change agenda. In summary, *in order to fulfil its stated desire to be a comprehensive university the team recommends that LBUS considers carefully how it can reflect opinions from across the spectrum. While the economic environment was a crucial factor in the future development of the*

*university the team recommends that there should also be allowance for the traditions flowing from the humanities and the wider cultural significance of the work of the university. In the view of the team this might help in securing the identity of the university.*

- 2.4 The team noted that the University had a keen sense of the funding challenges facing it with the significant decrease in student numbers in recent years associated with a decline in the HE student demographic, a more challenging entry baccalaureate and the availability of fewer programmes.
- 2.5 The university indicated that, on the whole, it saw its position as a teaching and scientific research public university within the Romanian higher education sector as appropriate. It did not appear to harbour ambitions to become an advanced research and teaching university. There is, however, the ambition to improve the university's ranking within the tier of teaching and scientific research institutions as well as a desire to reinforce its national reputation and build a greater awareness of its work in the wider international community.
- 2.6 The team were advised that the university saw the maintenance of the comprehensive nature of their programme offering as being of critical importance to its future sustainability. At the same time there is a desire to cut back on some specialisms and focus on the highest quality programmes. In terms of the quality of programmes, the SER indicates that in the 2011 national ranking process for Masters and Bachelor specialisations, 11 were ranked in Category A; 27 in Category B; 24 in Category C; and 8 in the D/E categories. The university indicates that improvement strategies are to be focused on those programmes in category C. This struck the team as imposing an undesirable ceiling to improvement strategies. *The team recommends that these strategies should not only be focused on those programmes in category C but should also look to sustain A-graded programmes, seek to improve programmes from B to A and finally look at the potential for improving D/E programmes where there was strong evidence of student demand.*
- 2.7 The urge to consolidate the current position of the university came through very strongly in meetings with the rector, the self-evaluation team and the newly formed Strategic Working Group. Some features of this consolidation emerged as (1) an emphasis on undergraduate education (2) a focus on



recruitment from the regions around Sibiu (3) the need to counteract competition from institutions in the wider Romania.

- 2.8 However, it appeared to the team that some of the indicators on recruitment posed a considerable challenge to this idea of consolidation. For example, in respect of the academic year 2012/13 the team understood that the university had a maximum capacity of 6,000 places allowed for by ARACIS. However, based on the university's strategy, 4,000 places were made available on undergraduate programmes; 3,000 applications were received and 2,100 students were accepted on programmes. Clearly if this pattern continued, for any length of time, the university would find it very difficult to sustain its desired student numbers of around 15,000 – 16,000.
- 2.9 Equally the team was struck by the reduction in number of distance-learning students, which it understood had declined from a peak of 9000 to the current figure of 1000. This appears to be the result of declining demand although there is also some scepticism in the university as to whether such programmes are appropriate for some subject disciplines. It was noted that there had been a degree of investment in this form of learning and this had been highlighted in the SER; but for the moment it appears to the team that this is not a priority for the university. While the principles underlying the use of technology in teaching and learning could be common both to distance-learning programmes and to programmes delivered in the university in the traditional way, the team was advised that ARACIS (Romanian Quality Assurance Agency) accredited distance-learning programmes separately from "standard" programmes and this stifled some of the potential for adopting technology-aided learning in standard programmes.
- 2.10 While it was suggested that some of the decline in recruitment might be made up by an increase in Masters-level students it did not appear to the team that there was a considered strategy to bring this about. Indeed while there was evidence of a desire to rebrand the university to help create a re-invigorated sense of identity for the university, there appeared to be a rather narrow view of how recruitment prospects might be improved with the local regions being seen as the boundaries of that ambition.

## Mission

2.11 The university's mission statement is summarised as follows:

- the promotion of education and research in accord with the requirements of a society based on knowledge and lifelong learning, integrated into the European and world context;
- the contribution to the local, regional and national development, from a social, economic, cultural and political point of view, through a significant commitment to the environment;
- thorough knowledge and original contributions to the main fields of science and technology specific for the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; flexible, interactive and continuing education for both students and graduates of higher education institutions;
- open to interaction with the economic, social and academic environment at a local, national and international level.

This is enshrined in an updated charter approved by the Senate (2011) that also meets the requirements of national legislation.

2.12 The team found these tenets to be largely confirmed during meetings with staff and students and understood that the university's senior management were looking at fresh ways in which this mission could be delivered. However, a number of factors were seen to act as barriers to development. These included (1) the ways in which Romanian law prescribed the curriculum and other aspects of the work of the university (2) the frequency of legislative change in Romania which made planning, especially in the financial domain, highly problematic (3) the turbulence in the national and wider European economy.

## Governance, management and institutional decision-making

2.13 The managerial structure, stated in the SER as determined by law, involves a hierarchy of Senate; Executive Board; Faculty Councils and Department Councils. The Rector chairs the Executive Board and, importantly, is elected following a vote of all staff in the university. This is seen as a critical community-wide endorsement of their programme.

- 2.14 The team noted that a strategic working group had been tasked by the rector to develop a new blueprint for the university (LBUS 2020). Both in the SER and in meetings the university has stressed the need to re-think its direction. It has also put at the forefront of this process of change a greater degree of managerialism highlighting the need to create a core of professional leaders. At the same time there is an expressed desire to increase the role and responsibility of the Senate in the decision-making process and a belief that there are clear benefits from decentralising power to the faculties and making them more responsible and accountable.
- 2.15 It was noteworthy, however, in terms of the role of faculties, that the SWOT analysis in the SER characterised faculties as showing “a passive attitude regarding strategic decisions and their application”. One dean noted, in response, that new faculty management teams had only been in place for a short time — the same time as the rector and his new team — and this placed obvious constraints on the current extent of change. The team also noted that while there was a strong, stated commitment to the involvement of students in decision making, there was no student representation on the Strategic Working Group and the conclusions emerging from the university’s SWOT analysis did not really carry forward recurrent themes identified in the student focus groups. *The team recommends including a student on the strategic working group in order to promote further students’ involvement in governance.*
- 2.16 The team recognised these as key issues for the university and were encouraged by the openness of the discourse in this respect. *The team strongly advises the university to gain a greater understanding of how it would balance some of these competing dynamics — central authority in driving forward change together with greater autonomy for the faculties; wider involvement in decision-making via the Senate while the Executive arm needs to be increasingly flexible and fleet footed in responding to the many challenges facing the university.*
- 2.17 While the SER included a number of diagrams and commentary on the organisation of the university it was not clear whether effective decision making operated within the institution. This was particularly true in relation to the deliberative structures. The team was keen to move beyond the theoretical and explore how, practically, the university responded to questions about student retention, progression and achievement and how career outcomes were

tracked. It was also important to track the outputs from research and the performance of the bureaucracy. It was understood that a number of elements of the deliberative structure were required by law and the team had the impression that this did not always support effective decision making. For example, in the area of quality management there were two sub-committees. In discussion, it was difficult to establish how far these met the requirements of a robust quality assurance (QA) oversight system or how, more specifically, they responded to identified weaknesses in the monitoring of quality in the university. It did not strike the team that these were necessarily the best vehicles for supporting a quality culture in the university. It was also apparent that too many decisions went through several layers of scrutiny/approval before a final decision was made. This could result in a lack of ownership of arrangements at the appropriate level. Broadly, the university needs to ensure that it avoids duplication of decision making and that the executive and deliberative arms of the university combine in the optimal way.

- 2.18 In this context, there was an acknowledgment that the university needed to challenge a mind-set stuck, in some ways, in the past. The team wondered whether this paradigm shift could occur when there seemed to be potential structural barriers to change. The relationship between the Executive and the Senate is clearly critical and it is important that this relationship gives impetus to the change agenda that is emerging in the university.
- 2.19 In the light of the various challenges facing the university the team explored the question of financial sustainability in a number of meetings with staff. Even though the university had to respond to considerable changes in the funding of universities in Romania the university appears to have been able to balance its budget over the last four years. The impact of this approach had been most keenly felt in expenditure relating to development where the budget had fallen by almost 16% from 2008 to 2011. While it was understandable that the university wanted to retain a tight control on expenditure there was a risk that such a decline in investment might undermine the potential for development in, for example, research, the wider IT infrastructure or staffing to support quality assurance processes. *In these circumstances the team recommends that further thought should be given to investment in development over the next four-year period.*

### 3. Teaching and learning

- 3.1 The components of the three-tier Bologna system are present in the academic structure at LBUS. As the SER notes, however, the academic autonomy of the university is constrained by the number of places allowed by ARACIS on Bachelor and Masters programmes and the nationally prescribed elements of the curriculum. The team were advised that, in respect of Bachelor programmes, the university only had academic discretion over 20% of the curriculum and that all study programmes had to be firstly authorised and then accredited by ARACIS and comply with nationally determined academic standards and criteria. LBUS is reviewing its Masters programmes as not all of them offer the opportunity to pursue doctoral studies.
- 3.2 When asked about the predominance of programmes in the “C category” in one of the faculties, some academic staff acknowledged that this was probably a true reflection of their status but pointed out that the criteria used by ARACIS was largely based on research outputs in the subject specialisations. In this sense this external scrutiny did not offer any great insight into the approach to learning and teaching. Student focus group comments in the SER, however, highlighted the view that some professors are self-centred rather than student-centred and that curriculum design is narrow and failed to reflect the interdisciplinary aspects of the subject. This was confirmed in meetings with students. Nevertheless there was evidence of external, company involvement with curriculum development although it was not clear to the team whether this might result in some programmes being developed that were too closely allied to the needs of a particular company with concomitant risks to the academic integrity of the programmes.
- 3.3 There was a general view expressed both at the level of senior managers and amongst academic staff that the low level of motivation of teaching staff is a serious problem. There were few, if any, promotion possibilities although there was some feeling that the Ministry of Education might change its policy in this area during 2013. Equally no new blood was entering the system with a government moratorium on new appointments. It was noted that staff mobility is generally poor in Romania and that the culture did not encourage movement of staff around the country. One professor expressed the view that it might require some form of legislation to change this. The team also noted that there

is a pattern of former LBUS students becoming professors and a real lack of external appointments to the teaching staff. In some areas of the university this was compensated for by academic staff studying abroad, either for a PhD or a post-doctoral qualification, and academic staff exchanges. Overall, there was a real concern expressed at a senior level that the quality of learning and teaching and the associated quality assurance systems could not be improved without appropriate resources and greater motivation amongst all staff.

- 3.4 *In this context the team recommends that it was important for good practice in teaching and learning to be shared and as much support as possible provided for teaching staff. It was clear that there is potential for sharing good practice across faculties; indeed some professors were keen to see a wider debate on didactic methods. The point was also made by one professor that the current arrangements did not provide for the training of academic staff to be educators and that there would be real benefit from an approach that allowed for the development of educational skills. The team learnt that the university did provide some workshops for teaching staff, for example, on motivating students but there did not appear to be formal staff development plans for staff either at the faculty or the university level. The team recommends that this gap in staff development plans should be addressed and that a particular focus could be on the development of a deeper understanding of some aspects of the Bologna Process such as the embedding of student-centred learning in the curriculum and the clear articulation of learning outcomes. It was notable that both these features were felt to be lacking in discussions that the team had with students from across the university. The team did note, however, that there was a determination at senior levels of the university to provide for the better preparation of staff for teaching and that a new department dedicated to enhancing teaching skills had just been established. There was also recognition that assessment instruments such as examinations needed to demonstrate that the appropriate learning outcomes were being tested.*
- 3.5 It was confirmed that an institutional learning and teaching strategy was being developed. *The team recommends that this should be progressed with some urgency as it would allow the university to respond to some of the factors raised in the paragraphs immediately above. Such a strategy could also include ways, for example, of promoting technology-aided learning; responding to student concerns over large class sizes; the length of the teaching day; bias in marking; the approach to tackling plagiarism; out-dated library stock; and the disruption*





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*of lectures and seminars by some students. It might also consider ways in which the curriculum could be developed to improve graduate transferrable skills, including teamwork, and provide a focus for improving the opportunities for, and the experience of, internships. Some of the most strongly expressed opinions from students in meetings and in comments in the SER related to lack of internships, poor organisation of these opportunities and a sense that they were not allocated on a fair basis. This lead the team to conclude that other graduate attributes could also be highlighted, for example, language skills and information literacy, the latter an area that the library might be able to take forward with faculties.*

- 3.6 The team was pleased to hear that, as a key support to such developments, the university was moving ahead with new arrangements for academic support for students. A new personal tutorial system would ensure that, at undergraduate level, all students were linked to an academic member of staff for the duration of their studies. This contact would also be sustained following graduation. The team found that there was general support for this initiative amongst both students and staff. One student commented that students wanted someone to care about them and their studies.
- 3.7 The team was interested to hear that staff in some faculties were visiting high schools and providing additional tutoring to pupils thinking of entering university – particularly in disciplines that required core knowledge in the sciences. While it was early days this work appeared to be having an impact.

## 4. Research

- 4.1 LBUS embeds research and knowledge transfer into many aspects of its mission and strategic goals. The team was fully supportive of this approach but found it difficult to clearly define the overall direction of research in the university, some of the ways in which it was organised and ways in which research output was funded and evaluated. In addition to these issues some of the metrics relating to the supervision of research students were not altogether transparent.
- 4.2 Outwardly, it appeared that research had taken a significant dip in progress in the last two years if measured by the number of published research papers. It was explained that the growth of papers up to 2010 was linked to government grants, which required publications as part of the contract. These grants had been reduced significantly in the past two years. It was noted that the engineering faculty produced half of the research papers for the university and that overall, the university had had a very large number of PhD students in relation to the numbers of professors identified as supervisors. The numbers of new PhD entrants were, however, falling. Support for supervisors or the training of new supervisors was still to be embedded in the research arrangements of the university. More generally the team noted that heads of department were regarded as being at the forefront of the research agenda in faculties although the dean was responsible for resourcing policy.
- 4.3 The team was advised of a well-developed structure of support for research in one of the faculties they visited – the faculty of theology. Doctoral students have two formal meetings with their supervisors in May and November of each year. Papers are published by a research centre based in the faculty. The faculty keeps track of graduates for three years after graduation and there is an active alumni association. The faculty organises four or five national and international conferences a year. There are strong links with institutes in the world outside Sibiu. The faculty gave the appearance of having a thriving research environment. The team viewed this as an example of good practice.
- 4.4 It was noted that while the engineering faculty contributes significantly to the published papers for the university the dean had indicated that, at the present time, he was concentrating on taught provision rather than research. This was largely connected to an exercise being conducted across all faculties to establish



the academic and financial viability of taught programmes. However, as taught programme grades were linked to research criteria, deans acknowledged that there is a need to reflect on what this said about the status of research in their faculties. It was acknowledged that this was the first time the ARACIS taught programme evaluation exercise had taken place and that perhaps it had not been approached, tactically, in the right way; the implication was that, with hindsight, some subject specialisms might have been dropped.

- 4.5 A large number of research centres seem to operate in the university although these were not identified in organisational diagrams. It emerged that these research centres are often built around a single professor although there is some involvement of post-doctoral staff and research students. Some professors felt that this worked reasonably well but admitted that practice was variable across departments. In practice it appears that these entities are research groups rather than research centres. There is a clear determination, at the most senior levels of the university, to tackle this problem. Non-active centres/groups would be closed and the intention is to concentrate on a smaller number of centres and demarcate them in four main categories – international; national; regional and local. *The team encouraged the university to ensure that there is a clear distinction between genuine research centres and those which are, in fact, research groups.*
- 4.6 The future direction of research in the university appears fluid with new initiatives to create PhD schools in discipline domains, for example, theology, humanities, engineering and the ring-fencing of funds to support work at PhD level. *The team finds as imperative the creation of an appropriate administrative mechanism to support this work.* Performance indicators (PIs), such as the numbers of published papers, are important but these had only just been set up on a national level. Previously PIs focused on process rather than outputs such as the submission of grant applications. One PhD student commented that, in terms of the research environment, communication amongst research students is improving. Weaknesses in the system, from the student perspective, included limited library resources and no real access to financial support to aid exploring material outside the country. In addition there are limited opportunities for doctoral students to gather together outside their discipline domain/doctoral field. The team noted that a number of HE institutions in Europe organise an annual research week to help bring together PhD students from across disciplines and develop their interaction with each other, more

experienced researchers and employers interested in applied research. This was something that might be considered at LBUS. *The team recommends that a first step might be the development of a university-wide community of doctoral students to facilitate the sharing of experience.*

- 4.7 The team was able to explore all these aspects of the research culture and operation at the university with a range of staff and students who are at the centre of this research activity. It was clear that the decrease in government financial support badly disrupted the impetus around research in the last two years. There was, perhaps, a disproportionate impact on staff morale and, as a consequence, *the university was looking to provide greater incentives for those engaged in research or research studies. This was a conscious decision of the university's management and the team endorses this approach.*
- 4.8 Research methodology, as part of support for doctoral studies, was found to be present in the university only as a general support and was not embedded in research study programmes. Research students confirmed that they felt that they were being held back by the lack of discipline specific research methodology training as part of their PhD programmes. *Given the reduction in the number of PhD students studying at the university, the team recommends that this is an opportune moment for those students to be provided with focused support in the area of research methodology.* This would meet the expectations for third-cycle studies in the Bologna Process. There was also merit in building aspects of personal competences in PhD studies alongside the core activity of deepening knowledge. This would help advance the employability prospects of doctoral students.
- 4.9 The team are of the strong opinion that some key building blocks for a thriving research environment still need development. This view was reinforced by a report on "Research, Development and Innovation at LBUS — current status, assessment and development prospects", written by the Vice-Rector for Research, and provided to the team as part of the additional documentation requested following the first visit in December 2012. The team found this report to be a comprehensive and honest appraisal of the current position of research in the university. In particular, there were a number of weaknesses identified in the report, which suggested that relatively urgent action was required to address these shortcomings. The team understood that there was a wider national context regarding some of these concerns. *The team notes it is of*



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*critical importance that the university develop a clear and rigorous action plan to tackle these various matters. The strong research tradition in some quarters of the university should be used as examples of good practice to support those faculties where there is less experience and evident weaknesses. This would aid the development of a more widely based research culture that could enhance the quality and standards of research across the university.*

## 5. Service to society

- 5.1 The team were able to discuss the university's relationship with the city and the wider region with the Mayor of Sibiu and a group of employers and alumni. There is, understandably, an emphasis in the university's SER on being an active member of the local community and also reference to positive partnerships with City Hall and major companies operating in the Sibiu region. The involvement of the university in organising the arrangements for Sibiu's period as European City of Culture in 2007 still provides a point of reference in the university for such partnership. *Yet, it seemed to the team from its meetings that there could be a greater and improved dynamic between the university and the city.* There was clearly a shared desire to see a comprehensive university with a student population at its current level but there appeared to be no shared projects — outside the cultural field — between City Hall and the university. It was suggested, for example, that there might be opportunities for involving the faculty of engineering in projects. *More generally, there was a desire from employers, endorsed by the team, to see an increase in practical training for students at the university.*
- 5.2 As part of the self-evaluation process the university undertook a stakeholder analysis and the focus group for employers provided important feedback on the need for graduates to be better prepared for employment. Views from these focus groups included the need to move away from teaching activities overly based on, often outdated, theory; for improved transferable skills and general competences; the barriers to effective internships; for effective, as opposed to certified, foreign language skills; and for a greatly improved student careers service. The team had hoped to explore some of these themes in the meeting with employers. However, the employers represented at the meeting did not feel that there were any issues of substance that needed addressing at the university in terms of graduate preparedness for work. They were keen for the university to continue moving closer to companies but, on the whole, professed themselves satisfied with their relationship with the university.
- 5.3 The university has established an Advisory Board comprising over 15 local and regional employers, the Mayor of Sibiu and senior figures from the university. This was seen as being of value by the employers the team met during the first



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visit. However, the university acknowledged that the Board was not working effectively and this might, in part, be the result of the lack of a historical base to such industry partnerships in the Romanian higher education system. The university was clear that such partnerships had to be founded in a “real” working together but it was not obvious to the team how this was being taken forward. While all agreed that this was an essential relationship, in some respects it appeared that both parties were waiting for the other to take the initiative. Equally, although there was broad agreement on the value of student internships with local companies there was little, by way of concrete examples, of broader knowledge exchange or the role of applied research in supporting the local/ regional community. This might help develop the “real” working relationships that all wanted to exist. The partnership with Continental Automotive Systems was provided as an example of best practice and there were some department-specific applied research links with companies. *This did not however appear to be part of a systematic approach to forming a partnership with the university. It was the view of the team that there was much greater potential for exploiting the “Knowledge Triangle” of education, research and innovation (business). This can help to create a new breed of entrepreneurs, enable individuals and multi-disciplinary teams to develop breakthrough ideas and allow such innovation to be linked to business in the regional and wider economy.*

## 6. Quality culture

- 6.1 The team noted that, in recent years, there had been an active debate in the university concerning the theory and practice of quality assurance and enhancement. The university had also been open to external scrutiny in this area. The rector and his management team were clearly keen to provide fresh impetus to this debate and to improve staff engagement in quality processes and the wider culture relating to quality enhancement. The SER and, in particular, the appendix on quality functional units, set out the university's processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of its academic provision. As part of the evaluation of quality culture across the university the team met with staff and students in a number of faculties. It emerged strongly from these meetings that the information and data required to scrutinise performance on programmes were either not available or only obtainable with some significant difficulty. For example, both staff and students confirmed to the team that the student feedback mechanisms faced a range of problems including poor student response rates, a lack of feedback to students, results of student feedback not being provided to professors, and some professors not responding to the feedback. There was the view at both faculty and central levels of the university that the existing quality processes and mechanisms were not working as effectively as they could.
- 6.2 In part this was attributed to the failings of the IT systems meant to support the quality process. The team learnt that one of the key information systems in this respect, QUANTIS, was viewed with limited confidence by many staff and that there was a desire to migrate to new software, possibly through a Google-based platform. In response to these difficulties one dean indicated that he relied on information on the quality of provision coming from other sources, for example, conversations with students, a complaints box, the completion of forms on the internet, and talking to colleagues.
- 6.3 In these circumstances it was difficult for the team to see how there could be formal and proper consideration of the key indicators relating to quality. In addition it was not clear to the team how data on student retention, progression and achievement was considered alongside feedback from students. Teaching staff volunteered the view that, depending on the faculty, between 15-20% of a new cohort would fail to complete their course. This



excluded those students who failed some part of the course but continued their studies by repeating the failed elements.

- 6.4 The university's SER expressed a view from students that there is a need for an improved system of quality monitoring. This was reinforced in meetings with students. Students identified a number of issues that concerned them including the subjective assessment (favouritism) of students by some professors; an anxiety that questionnaires were not kept confidential and that honest comments might result in victimisation (although there was greater confidence now that the questionnaires were being handled centrally); students being recruited with low grades who subsequently were disruptive in lectures/seminars (some students went so far as to suggest a separate entrance examination as a way of counteracting this problem).
- 6.5 The team was interested to hear of a Facebook survey conducted by students in one of the faculties that asked a number of questions as to why students dropped out. The answers were in line with other comments received from students. The four main reasons were (1) good students leaving because of disruption in lectures; (2) the scheduling of lectures from early in the morning to late at night (8am to 8pm); difficulties in relationships between some professors and their students; (4) students entering programmes without the relevant subject background. It was also acknowledged that some students left for economic reasons.
- 6.6 The team gained the impression that these issues were recurrent ones and that the quality assurance processes were either (a) failing to identify the problems or (b) failing to tackle the issues. However, the team was advised of a major exercise, initiated by the Rectorate, currently taking place in all faculties to evaluate the academic and financial viability of programmes and no doubt these reviews would draw on data and information linked to many of the issues raised above. *While, undoubtedly, this was a crucial and timely exercise there was a need for the university to strengthen its core day-to-day operations in quality management. There was, in the view of the team, a strong case for enhancing the role and authority of the Quality Assurance Department and this might be achieved, in part, by linking it directly to the Rectorate. Notwithstanding some of the less than helpful requirements linked to national laws, for example, to staff appointments, deliberative structures and to curriculum development, ultimately the university needed to ensure that its quality assurance processes*



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*were able to identify problems and resolve the issues with greater rigor. In this context, the university would benefit from consulting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area.*



## 7. Internationalisation

- 7.1 As part of its strategic development LBUS has prioritised links with other universities in the European Union and also more widely in other regions of the world. The scope of these links is considerable and the SER notes that in the last four years LBUS had signed 44 cooperation agreements with a long list of countries. Overall LBUS has more than 90 such agreements.
- 7.2 LBUS's international strategy was not, however, highlighted to the team during its various meetings. Indeed, in many of the meetings there was far more commentary on the local/regional dimension of the university. The impression gained was of a proliferation of international links but with little sense of how these fitted into a wider strategic objective. In addition there was no information on how the benefits of these links were being evaluated. While in the short term there was clear value in raising the profile of LBUS in the wider international arena there was a danger that such an expansive approach would, in due course, dissipate resources in the university and hinder the delivery of real, measurable benefits. *The university should, therefore, formulate a clear international strategy and, in the medium- to long-term, consider providing more focused international links both in terms of countries and subject disciplines.*
- 7.3 Staff directly involved in international activity were found to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic and provided a range of support for international students, particularly in relation to financial support. It was established that there were 458 international students of which 60% joined Masters' programmes, 20% Bachelors' programmes and 20% started PhDs. There was a very strong trend in recruitment to the engineering faculty. There was evidence of coordination of activities with faculties through the Vice-Deans for student affairs. However, the central staff support for this activity was, in common with other central activities, relatively limited and the IT and information infrastructure needed development.
- 7.4 Staff and students were generally enthusiastic about the value of international links and opportunities but there was limited mobility through the ERASMUS programme and students that had studied elsewhere in the EU through



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ERASMUS felt that the organisation of these activities at the partner university was rather better than at LBUS. *On return not all ECTS credits were incorporated into their home programme, a problem acknowledged by the International Department. The team recommends, therefore, that the university should ensure there are rigorous systems in place for recording ECTS when students return from their Erasmus programmes.*

- 7.5 The team felt that there was greater scope for the recruitment of international students outside the area of engineering and therefore, as suggested, by one professor, *the team recommends that the university take advantage of the opportunities for developing more programmes in English, perhaps initially with an offer of 60 ECTS to facilitate student exchange.*
- 7.6 Equally the ability of students from across Europe and the wider world to understand the potential for studying at LBUS could be increased if *the English language version of the university's website was kept up-to-date and offered more specific guidance on the content of academic programmes.*
- 7.7 The team was impressed with the breadth of activity in the international arena. It felt, however, that international students studying at the university could benefit from a greater involvement with the affairs of the city. There could be reciprocal benefits to this integration. *The team recommends that the university should work jointly with the Mayor's office to consider ways in which international students might be more involved with cultural and other events in the city.*

## 8 Conclusion

- 8.1 Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu is establishing a clear sense of its future direction in a period of significant and continuing change in the national higher education landscape. It has a realistic sense of what can be achieved in the short- to medium-term and is determined to build its development from a sound financial base.
- 8.2 The team was impressed with the ambition shown by the new rector and his senior management team to harness improvement to change and it appeared that this was being embraced by the wider university community. It was acknowledged that there were significant barriers to change, many encountered in the external HE environment in Romania. The team was struck by the almost unanimous view in the university that the vagaries of changing national laws did little to support considered academic and financial planning or the enhancement of a quality culture. In particular, this had a damaging impact on staff morale; the barriers to recruitment of academic and administrative staff were challenging both core systems for quality management and improvements in learning and teaching across all disciplines. Notwithstanding these external constraints, there is still much scope for the university to change and improve and this was perhaps evidenced most clearly in the views of some of the younger teaching staff. Here the team saw the potential for innovation in the curriculum, especially in respect of employability; the delivery of student-centred learning; and an understanding that academic staff had to be at the forefront of improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and research. This provided for greater optimism about the future. This was also recognised by many of the students who the team met during the evaluation.
- 8.3 Students were supportive of the broad ambitions of the university and many felt that the comprehensive nature of the academic portfolio was a key attraction to them in selecting the university. There was a clear indication from students that they felt more involved and had a greater voice following the election of the new rector. The team also found evidence that the student council was developing into a valuable forum for the student voice.

- 8.4 The university had set about a thorough review of all its activities and had already identified many strengths and weaknesses. The honesty with which it was pursuing this ambitious review was critical to its future success, not least in respect of the research agenda. The team was convinced, however, that the Rector's programme for change was taking the university in the right direction and that, with the support of the wider community, the university's future was sustainable and open to significant improvement in the key areas of teaching, learning and research.

## Recommendations

### Governance and institutional decision-making

- 9.1 To fulfil its desire to be a comprehensive university LBUS needs to consider carefully how it can reflect opinions from across the spectrum.
- 9.2 In the future development of the university there should also be allowance for the traditions flowing from the humanities and the wider cultural significance of the work of the university. This might help in securing the identity of the university.
- 9.3 Improvement strategies should not only be focused on those programmes in category C but should also look to sustain A-graded programmes, seek to improve programmes from B to A and finally look at the potential for improving D/E programmes where there was strong evidence of student demand.
- 9.4 To support the involvement of students in the affairs of the university, there is a case for including a student on the Strategic Working Group.
- 9.5 The university needs to gain a greater understanding of how it will balance some competing dynamics — central authority in driving forward change together with greater autonomy for the faculties; wider involvement in decision-making via the Senate while the Executive arm needs to be increasingly flexible and fleet footed in responding to the many challenges facing the university.



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- 9.6 The university should give further thought to its investment in development as this has seen a considerable reduction in the last four years.

### Teaching and learning

- 9.7 It is important for good practice in teaching and learning to be shared by the community and as much support as possible provided for teaching staff. It is clear that there is the potential for sharing good practice across faculties. This might be helped by the introduction of staff development plans at both faculty and institutional levels. A particular focus might be the development of a deeper understanding of some aspects of the Bologna Process such as the embedding of student-centred learning in the curriculum and the clear articulation of learning outcomes.
- 9.8 An institutional learning and teaching strategy should be developed that responds to some of the problems observed and could include ways, for example, of promoting technology-aided learning; tackling student concerns over large class sizes and the length of the teaching day; bias in marking; the approach to tackling plagiarism; out-dated library stock.
- 9.9 The university should consider ways in which the curriculum could be developed to improve graduate transferrable skills, including team working, language skills and information literacy and also provide a focus for improving both opportunities for, and the experience of, internships.

### Research

- 9.10 The university should make clear the distinction between genuine research centres and those which are, in fact, research groups.
- 9.11 It is imperative to create an appropriate administrative mechanism to support research.
- 9.12 Efforts should be made to develop a university wide community of doctoral students to facilitate the sharing of experience.



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- 9.13 The university should continue to explore ways in which research activity can be incentivised.
- 9.14 There should be a greater emphasis on the teaching of research methodology as part of doctoral studies and this should be linked to the particular subject discipline.
- 9.15 The university should pay particular attention to the weaknesses identified in the report on research provided to the team.
- 9.16 There is considerable scope for the sharing of good practice in research identified in some faculties and this would support the development of a wider research culture across the university.

### **Service to Society**

- 9.17 There should be a greater and improved dynamic between the university and the city.
- 9.18 There should be an increase in practical training for students at the university and, jointly, the university and local companies should support the development of further opportunities in respect of student internships in the local economy.
- 9.19 The university should work with employers and the Mayor of Sibiu to improve the effectiveness of the Advisory Board.

### **Quality Culture**

- 9.20 There needs to be an improved system of quality monitoring to tackle some problems identified by students e.g. the subjective assessment (favouritism) of students by some professors; a concern that questionnaires were not kept confidential and that honest comments might result in victimisation.
- 9.21 The role of the Quality Assurance Department should be enhanced and, perhaps, linked directly to the Rectorate team.



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- 9.22 The university needs to ensure that its quality assurance processes are able to identify problems and resolve the issues with greater rigour. The university would benefit from consulting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area.

### **Internationalisation**

- 9.23 The university should formulate a clear international strategy and, in the medium- to long-term, should consider providing more focused links both in terms of countries and subject disciplines.
- 9.24 The university should ensure that there are rigorous systems in place for recording ECTS when students return from their Erasmus programmes.
- 9.25 The university should take advantage of the opportunities for developing more programmes in English, perhaps initially with an offer of 60 ECTS to facilitate student exchange.
- 9.26 The English language version of the university's website should be kept up-to-date and also offer more specific guidance on the content of academic programmes.
- 9.27 The university should work with the Mayor's Office to consider ways in which international students might be involved with cultural events in the City.