THE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES AND VETERINARY MEDICINE (USAMV) OF CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of *the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca, Romania.* The evaluation took place in May and September 2012 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 and international 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. The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine and the national context

The University was founded in 1869 as the Institute of Agronomic Studies in the former domain of Mănăştur. Originally the Institute operated with a single Faculty of Agriculture but following various developments and iterations new Faculties have been developed: a Faculty of Veterinary Medicine was established in 1962; in 1968 a Faculty of Animal Science (to which was added Biotechnology in 1992); a Faculty of Horticulture was added in 1977. It is currently planned to introduce a fifth faculty, that of Food Science and Food Technology. The institution was designated as a State (public) University in July 1995 under its present title: *The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca (USAMV).* It currently has 6250 students.

The recently enacted new education law aimed to provide universities in Romania with greater degrees of autonomy than hitherto and this is to be welcomed. Within limits the University is able to determine its own structure, decentralise budgets and give greater responsibility to academics and executive alike. However, the evaluation team identified (and notes throughout this report) a number of external restrictions, which still constrain the University's ability to manage itself effectively, including restrictions on expenditure and staffing (where the Ministry remains a major influence).

In 2003 the University chose to undertake an institutional evaluation through the IEP, the conclusions of which had clearly been acted upon over the last few years. In 2009, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) placed the University in its highest category of confidence. Following the new classification system introduced in 2011 by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, the University stated it was placed in the fifth position of the top 12 institutions and first amongst the Agricultural (Life Sciences) universities in Romania, emphasising its strong research base. The University's mission, as embodied in its charter, is:

'professional formation at university level and the scientific knowledge production by research and innovation'... realized by education and advanced scientific research.'

The University aimed to fulfil its mission,

> *'by promoting excellence in education, research and innovation, by initial and post-university formative study programmes, by lifelong learning systems and by acceding to the university values, in accordance with the requirements of a knowledge-based society'*
> (Strategic Plan 2012-2016).

The University identified a number of key factors which made its environment particularly unstable. The new law had been introduced and its implications were unfolding gradually. There is instability within the higher education system itself with a number of changes in Ministerial positions over the last few months and years. There is funding instability and uncertainty about the long term criteria/data-set for classifying universities. This has to be coupled with the global economic crisis and the impact of demographic changes which has brought about a decline in the number of young people about to enter higher education - this number will have decreased by 30% by 2014.

1.3. The self-evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a group chaired by the Vice Rector (Research) and comprised the other five Vice Rectors, the four Deans and the Head of the Research Department. (There were no students in this group although the university emphasised that they were involved at all stages).

The process of preparing the evaluation had been rapid, starting with a meeting in January 2012 with UEFISCDI in Bucharest, followed in February-March with the convening of the SER group and proceeding through an iterative process of consultation with, and data collection by, faculties and departments (including administrative) and individual staff. Departments contributed to the SWOT analysis which represented a synthesis drawn from a large number of viewpoints. Staff were informed of progress and interim outcomes were published *via* the intranet. Students who are well represented at all levels from departmental committees to Senate were involved through this mechanism. In addition the Rector visited all Departments to obtain feedback.

It was clear to the evaluation team that there had been an extensive opportunity for all parts of the University to participate in this process, and this had been done

enthusiastically. The SWOT analysis appeared to be accurate and commendably penetrating. However, the Team felt that the self-evaluation report (SER), whilst comprehensive in its coverage, was somewhat less evaluative than might have been hoped for and failed to confront the issues identified by the University as weaknesses and threats sufficiently in the documentation. Nevertheless, in discussion, the University was prepared to be open and frank about its perception of its current position.

The style of the SER, however, reinforced a key point for the evaluation team. The University's dual structure creates a pressing issue; that of getting the correct balance between the highly consultative and democratic processes on the one hand and an active Executive able to lead the institution and influence its direction effectively on the other.

1.4.   The evaluation team (later the Team)

The self-evaluation report of the University, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in April/May. The visits of the Team took place in May and September 2012, respectively. In between the visits the University provided the Team with some additional documentation.

The evaluation team consisted of:
- Professor Bent Schmidt-Nielsen, former Rector, Royal Veterinary & Agricultural University, Denmark, Team Chair
- Professor Carmen Fenoll, former Vice-Rector, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain
- Professor Ivan Ostrovsky, Pro-Rector, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
- Ms. Anouk Platteel, Postgraduate student researching Animal Sciences, Wageningen University, the Netherlands
- Professor Robin Smith, Director of Arethusa Projects Ltd. and Former Pro Vice Chancellor, Anglia Ruskin University, Team Coordinator

The Team thanks the Rector, Professor Doru Pamfil, and the Vice Rector, Professor Carmel Socaciu (liaison person), as well as all participating members of the University for their courtesy, hospitality and enthusiastic engagement with the process of evaluation. In addition, thanks are due to the many external partners and stakeholders who provided valuable comments during the visits.

2. Governance and institutional decision making

2.1 Structures for management and leadership

The formal structures of all Romanian Universities are based upon the requirements of the New Education Act and are highly bureaucratic and complex. USAMV essentially has two organisational dimensions. The first dimension encompasses the Executive, which includes the Rector, who is elected by the whole University. He then appoints the six Vice Rectors and chooses the four Deans from two faculty nominees (also proposed through election). There is an Administrative Council (essentially the executive body comprising senior managers and the Student Prefect) which undertakes the day to day management of the University. This has a number of Councils, chaired by the Vice Rectors according to their particular remits. The Administrative Council is chaired by the Rector. In parallel, the second dimension comprises the Senate and a number of Commissions covering almost identical areas of strategic importance as the Councils, such as Teaching and Learning, Research, Social and Student Issues, and International Relations. The Rector is not the Chair of the Senate, but a President is elected for this purpose from across the University. Currently this is the former Rector. The Executive does not have membership on either the Senate or its Commissions.

The Senate is an important body in that it approves the University Charter (recently changed), determines regulations, approves and monitors the budget and directly oversees a host of other issues including staffing policies, educational processes, programmes and the structure of the University itself. It monitors the Administrative Council and its sub-committees. In addition it approves the Strategic Plan, which is seen as a 'contract' between the Rector and the Senate and against which he is judged annually. The President of Senate signs the 'managing contract' of the Rector. The Senate members, however, have no personal legal responsibilities.

The Senate was described as not being controversial but should conflict occur with the Executive, the Senate is the supreme decision-making body in the management of the University. In the view of the Team this very complex dual process of decision-making is time consuming, and a duplication of effort, as issues are tracked through the various Senate and Executive stages through a consecutive and ponderous process. No member of the Administrative Council is a member of Senate (although the Rector and Vice Rectors are invited to attend meetings from time to time, depending on the agenda). Weekly meetings are held between the Chairs of Senate Commissions and the Vice Rector with the appropriate remit. At a time when resources are under severe pressure this is also very costly. The parallel system is inherently unstable and cannot be guaranteed to operate successfully into the future, dependent as it is on good personal

relationships. In the context of an HE environment which is stable and slow to change the structure might be appropriate. However, in the current highly competitive national and global context where change is rapid and endemic the University's structures limit the capacity of the University to change and adapt in comparison with many international universities, unrestricted by national legislation in this way. Its ability to meet some of its strategic goals is therefore restricted.

In the view of the Team there is a danger of imbalance towards overly democratic practices (with currently no responsibility) at the expense of real executive authority with legally defined responsibilities. Within the constraints laid down by the Law, the Executive and Senate might wish to identify and adopt strategies that overcome some of these inefficiencies and hurdles to effective decision-making and swift implementation.

The Team recommends that:
- the Executive, with the Senate, should continue their close internal collaboration in the pursuit of corporate goals, but develop clear terms of reference for committees and individuals in order to avoid future conflict and to speed up internal decision-making;
- The Team recommends that the University should find creative ways to:
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  ➢ establish substructures which are stream-lined;
  ➢ identify processes which do not require parallel tracking of issues;
  ➢ develop institutional practices which allow decision making to be fast and focused.

2.2 The strategic planning process

It was noted that the processes for creating the Strategic Plan were relatively new and the expectation was that they would be refined over time as experience operating under the new law developed. Creating the Strategic Plan is an extensive process, starting 'bottom-up' from the Departments. Departments had contributed views to the Faculties for onward transmission up the line to the Institutional Development Council, a sub-committee of the Administrative Council, which analysed the proposals for synthesis and final agreement through Senate, which has the ultimate responsibility. The Plan is subsequently monitored *via* the Institutional Development Council. It is therefore influenced in its development through the dual structure of the executive route as well as the academic through Senate. This is appropriate.

However, the Team noted that these processes had resulted in a Strategic Plan which had 19 key objectives and over 90 other objectives, some of which are very generalized. It had been developed into an Action Plan (2012 – 2014) comprising 46 Planned Actions. The plans were based around the following major headings: *Education, Research, Infrastructure & Financial Management, International Relations and Partnership with Students.* Although the structure of the plan was prescribed by ARACIS, the contents appeared to be a comprehensive summation of deliberations from the academic community rather than a *strategic statement* based upon a considered judgment of priorities. Faculties confirmed that they identified selectively with the Strategic Plan rather than seeing it as the basis for focused and guided activity at faculty and departmental levels.

In the view of the Team all the ingredients for effective strategic planning are present in the University's processes and it should be commended for the intended consultation with external stakeholders and the wide and diverse involvement of the academic and administrative community. However, the selective identification of Faculties with the extensive plan, and an often quoted concern about the constant changes brought about by external factors (such as legal constraints, Ministry oversight, economic pressures) has made the Strategic Plan appear more tactical and short term oriented than one based on the University's own vision of itself and a focused judgment of how this might be achieved over a longer term. As an illustration of this the University might focus on the dilemma outlined in sections 4 and 5 of this report regarding the need for a targeted approach to research to create critical mass and the acquisition of income derived from knowledge transfer, consultancy and services to society.

Strategic plans can be structured in many different ways but there remains a need, at the University, to engage in a second phase of strategic planning after distilling the current plan into a longer term vision-driven strategy: that is for the faculties and departments to re-focus their objectives in the light of the identified corporate goals. Once agreed, targets, milestones, dates and responsibilities can be identified in a more rolling operational plan for annual monitoring purposes.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- identify some institutions outside Romania with similar missions to benchmark against and to review the style of presentation, and processes for the creation, of their strategic plans;
- distil the current Strategic Plan into a longer term focused strategy, identifying its major themes based on the vision that the University has of itself and its judgment of priorities ;

- extract a more detailed, short term action plan from the Strategic Plan in order to provide a basis for the subsequent monitoring of milestones.

2.3 Finance and budget

The University has been very active in trying to secure external funding in the form of grants from the European Commission, national and international research funding, laboratory services income and donations, in order to enhance income against a backdrop of declining State funding. Prior to the new law universities had been financed on the basis of student numbers which contributed 70% of state financing. Some 70% of the University's students are State financed for tuition fees and the remainder self-financing. Twenty-six Quality Indicators provided the balance. The quality proportion is now built into the new criteria for classifying universities which made it essential, in the view of the University, to be classified in the category of "teaching and advanced research universities". Given the University's standing, this has maximised income (equivalent to the previous year) whereas other category universities had been disadvantaged. 5% of funding is now also based on 18 performance indicators relating to research performance including the number of PhD graduations (140 in 2011), impact factors such as citations and publications in *Institute for Scientific Information* (ISI) journals, etc.

An active policy of engaging with business and industry is being pursued but there was recognition that greater effort would need to be invested in this area of activity. The Rector had taken active steps to enhance the University's capability with regard to business and industry by looking into the processes adopted in the USA. The establishment of two Executive Committees reporting to the Vice Rector (Institutional Development) namely, the University's Strategies Council and the Commission for Relations with the Economic Environment (see section 5), provided *fora* through which the support of external stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally could be mobilised and advice sought. The University should be congratulated on the activities it has undertaken in order to lever up income from diverse sources. However, the University remains heavily dependent on State income. There is little doubt that currently finances are unpredictable, unstable and threatened and therefore the degree to which a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurialism can be released within the University will be important in securing a viable financial future.

The University has made steps in the right direction by introducing a (as yet untested) process of devolved budgeting with the aim of supporting a more entrepreneurial culture at faculty and departmental levels and to generate income. The Rectorate and Deans were aware of the implications of devolved budgeting on their ability to steer the institution *via* its funding mechanisms and were confident that the process through

which all parts of the University were engaged in strategic planning, together with the system of 'contracts' which provide a framework for action, will enable the institution to move forward coherently as a single corporate entity. Money for services and research can now flow into departments in addition to funds based on student numbers/credits and quality indices. A 'top slice' of around 30-50% is received by the University and around 15% by the faculties.

However, severe external constraints operate on expenditure processes within the University. All income is defined for the purposes of regulation as 'state financing' and this is subject to internal micro-management (by Law) and from the Ministry. Whilst Departments would determine how to spend their money in the future, the Rector (and Vice Rectors) had to sign off all expenditure items. This is a legal requirement. Financial/procurement paperwork is tracked through central departments (albeit often through effective electronic processes). The Team noted that expenditure is still closely scrutinised by the Ministry. Thus any capital expenditure over the sum of 1800 LEI (€450) is subject to external approval (which is less than the price of a laptop computer). Weekly, monthly and trimestral financial reports detailing expenditure items are sent to the Ministry (including annexes with invoices, contracts, payment details etc.). In the view of the Team such controls are not conducive to the development of an entrepreneurial, innovative and globally competitive HE system.

2.4   Human resources

Human resources are still subject to external Ministry control. A two year moratorium on appointments has recently been relaxed and a list of twenty five lecturer posts is likely to be considered in the next round, which is thought to be in the ratio of one permitted appointment to every seven vacancies. As a result of the cut-back in staff numbers, staff-student ratios are under severe pressure and some Faculties have reduced student numbers. At the level of assistant lecturer, Heads of Department can buy-in temporary staff for short periods with Faculty Council agreement. However, the situation is still problematic in that there is severe pressure on existing staff to cover administrative, research and teaching commitments. In addition, in relation to senior/professorial positions, new criteria have been established for *habilitation* (see section 4 below) which will impact on the University's research endeavours and therefore State financing and independent income generation. In such circumstances the University will need to focus further on its internal HR development processes in order to enhance the teaching and research skills of its existing staff.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- seek to enhance its staff development activities with a view to maintaining or enhancing its current position among Romanian universities.

2.5 Organisational capacity for effective change

Despite the claim that the new law gives greater and necessary autonomy for Romanian Universities, they are, to the Team's mind, clearly still subject to a number of constraints that put them at a disadvantage compared to many global competitors. Severe limitations on maneuverability in relation to, *inter alia*:

- organisational structures and roles
- strategic planning processes
- staffing
- finance
- Doctoral School activity and PhD processes

undermine the development of a culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism within the sector generally, and militates against leaders attempting to create dynamic and responsive organisations. As a result, the Team considers that the capacity of the University to change and adapt is seriously limited in comparison with many non-Romanian universities with which it wishes to collaborate or with which it is in competition.

While USAMV can do little to overcome these external factors itself, it can seek to act collectively with other higher education institutions and economic sectors to facilitate more effective promotion of entrepreneurialism.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- seek to develop proactive strategies and innovative solutions internally to overcome externally created constraints;

- in collaboration with other Romanian universities, businesses and other stakeholders, press the case for change so that international best practices can be adopted to the benefit of Romania more widely;

- focus on diversifying income streams as a major theme in strategic planning.

3. Teaching and Learning

3.1 Quality in the classroom

In the dual organisational structure two bodies play a role in the oversight of the teaching and learning processes of the University, the Senate's Teaching and Didactic Commission and the Administrative Council's Didactic Council, although the distinctive remits of each remained unclear for the Team.

Since 1990 the challenge of improving teaching has been confronted head on by the University. The introduction of the Bologna process with an emphasis on student-centred learning, flexibility, choice and innovation in assessment practices, together with a renewed focus on the balance between theory and practice in agricultural and veterinary programmes are, to the University's mind, progressively bringing about the required improvements in teaching and learning. Elective routes are limited in the Bachelor's programmes and absent altogether at Master's level. This sat uncomfortably with the idea of student-centred learning at undergraduate level and may not fit the graduate for the employment market particularly effectively. A key consideration in the Bachelor degree was that declining staff resources have necessitated a reduction in electives compared to five years ago. However, every Bachelor specialization is followed by a specific Masters programme. The University explained that the four-year Bachelor programmes provide a firm basis for a more narrowly focused programme at Master's level.

Each faculty has a Vice Dean for Academic Affairs who has an interest in the effective delivery of programmes in the classroom. The Vice Dean holds regular meetings with departmental representatives and weekly meetings with the Vice Rector (Academic). In this way teaching activity can be monitored at the level of the classroom and the Executive can be kept informed at Faculty and University levels that teaching and learning policies are being implemented. In monitoring such activity the University adopts several monitoring methods, all at departmental level:

- Departments carry out regular reviews of groups of programme specialities to ensure that the nature of the programme and related pedagogy are relevant to the students' needs.
- The percentage of theoretical content given to students is monitored.
- Assessment practices are scrutinised.
- Feedback from students on committees and questionnaires are analysed and considered by Vice Deans and Heads of Department.

Veterinary and agricultural science programmes have undergone considerable curriculum change in Europe. USAMV's involvement with other specialist European universities has provided a basis for staff development especially amongst younger staff in bringing back innovatory teaching practices. In addition, engaging with European professional and accreditation bodies, such as EAEVE, has led the way to the adoption of European standards.

The SWOT had identified the '*quality control of the educational activity… [as] deficient'*. This analysis illustrates the willingness of the University to identify and confront weaknesses transparently and it is congratulated for this. The University explained that this reflected the fact that entrants to the university were now more deficient in the basic sciences than previously and that younger staff were focusing much more on research than on pedagogy (an inevitable consequence of choices made in relation to future career prospects in light of externally derived HR criteria for selection and advancement). In addition peer group evaluation of teaching no longer took place.

Students confirmed that staff adopted a variety of teaching and learning styles including interactive sessions and group project work. Some would have preferred more electives to be available within the curriculum. Students believed that the assessment processes are carried out in a fair and effective manner. Criteria for assessment are made explicit and there is consultation over dates for examinations. Students receive standard 'study guides' setting out programme details, content, objectives and bibliographies, etc. This is good practice and there is clearly a positive relationship between students and teachers and general satisfaction with the learning environment. Departments across the University have made sustained efforts to develop student centred learning although progress is variable across programmes and amongst staff.

The Team wishes to commend the University for the role played at departmental level by representatives who supervise and monitor teaching activities and report to Vice Deans and Heads of Department. The system seems to be well understood and appreciated by staff and students alike. However, it was noted by the Team that the Quality Assurance Department does not figure in the reporting loops following the extensive activity undertaken through the processes described above. It considered that the University's overall quality monitoring procedures might be more complete if QAD were able to appraise and report the quality of provision in a more holistic manner.

3.2   Student engagement

Concern was expressed by the Team regarding the apparently high drop-out rates. This varied between Faculties at full-time Bachelor level from 17% - 30% in year 1; and at full time Masters between 0%-13% in year 1. To some degree this can be explained at undergraduate level by the national system of student registration which allows first year undergraduates to enrol in two institutions simultaneously (taking short term advantage of student facilities at one institution whilst engaging in programme activity in the second). This 'creative' use of the regulations is outside the control of the University and makes the figures look artificially inflated, lowers morale and is bad for the University's reputation internationally. The University is taking steps (such as monitoring attendance and visits to schools to consolidate its relationship with potential entrants). Nevertheless the Team identified the need to develop further a strategy to overcome this problem to see whether these figures can be reduced, including focusing on, for example, its student support structures and mid-term evaluations or tests/examinations, to support students in identifying their progress.

Students are uniformly proud of the University (which they referred to as 'our' university) and are supportive of all aspects of its development. Students are fully represented at all levels of decision-making (up to 25% of Senate and other committees). Staff are generally felt to be approachable and personal conversations with tutors are seen as a faster route to resolving issues than the committee system, which is nevertheless regarded as important. Student engagement with these processes, however, still has some progress to make. Response rates to student questionnaires are disappointingly low (see section 6) and therefore judgments were being made on partial data.

3.3   Student services

Students had recently elected a Prefect (Student President) who is working hard to gather student representatives together to provide a coherent student body and voice. However, this is being done in parallel to a full-time Masters programme with no administrative support and no finance. The University might wish to consider how it could further support the development of the student body in all aspects of their activity from pastoral and social to pedagogic in this respect.

Although there was some confusion amongst students regarding the provision of services in the area of careers guidance, and there was concern amongst students about job prospects (although 75% of students were in employment within 12 months of graduation), the University has established a Careers Guidance Centre staffed with qualified individuals with access to a database of career opportunities. Working closely with the Commission for Relations with Graduates, events and talks are organised to help students determine their preferred course of action. Each Year Group has a Tutor

with responsibility for advising students on the best course preferences, and therefore on electives to take, in pursuing their individual goals.

The Team recommends that the University should:
- develop ways to overcome what appears to be an excessive drop-out rate during both the first year and at Master's level, for example, mid-term student assessments in order to monitor individual progress, notwithstanding the fact that students can have dual enrolment;
- consider providing the student body, through the Student Prefect, with adequate resources to complete the important tasks expected of it .

3.4   Facilities

Since the last visit by the IEP in 2003, considerable progress has been made in building up the infrastructure of the University to its present status as a high quality asset for the city, offering facilities for leisure through its recently opened botanical garden and park.

Student facilities

Student accommodation is on a separate site in close proximity to the main campus. Students are housed in rooms comprising between 2 to 4 people at a cost of 15 Euro per month with communal kitchen, laundry and showers. Not all students could be housed in the dormitories or wished to be. All dormitories have internet connections and are clean and presentable. Although individually the shared rooms are not conducive to private study, a separate study room has been provided in each building. Students are generally satisfied with the accommodation which is seen as acceptable in a Romanian context. Single furnished rooms were available especially for international students if requested but at an extra cost, since the norm is to share. In time, the University might wish to consider the provision of single study rooms if it is to enhance its reputation as a destination for foreign students from a wider group of countries.

On a further site, again close by, the University provides a student restaurant, bar, doctor and dentist at low prices. Students from other Cluj universities can make use of these facilities. A sports centre provides opportunities for tennis, football, volleyball, a gym. Staff at the centre are alert to the needs of the disabled and adjusted provision where possible to meet individual needs.

Learning Facilities

The Team had an opportunity to tour the learning resources on the campus which is well cared for and attractive. Clinics and laboratories are satisfactory and in some cases excellent. Veterinary clinics are of suitable standard and a new large animal clinic is in

preparation. A new biotechnology facility has been built, designed to facilitate interfaculty activity and is of a very high standard with a significant amount of modern analytical instrumentation.

A new library has just completed construction and will open for the new 2012/13 academic year. The current Library is open from 08.00 to 20.00 and longer during examination periods. Students felt this was adequate. A shared digital library financed through a government project over four years had recently gone off-line as the funding had finished. As a consequence, some databases are no longer available. This is clearly a retrograde step, but the University, in partnership with other universities, is seeking a way to re-establish it. Students pointed out that there is no wifi system across the University campus and therefore the ability to work on laptops flexibly anywhere on site is curtailed.

4. Research

4.1 Staff research

The University has been placed in the 'teaching and advanced research universities' category in the Romanian system of University categorisation and perceives itself as holding fifth position nationally amongst Universities. This demonstrates a strong and broad commitment to research at the University and it is to be congratulated for its achievements to date. Retaining this status and indeed developing the University's international standing is a major element of the current Strategic Plan, as can be seen in, for example, the development of new research institutes, a new Faculty of Food Science and Food Technology and the role research plays in the staff evaluation processes.

Research is overseen by a Vice Rector and a Director of Research. Under the Administrative Council a Research Council has been established comprising the Vice Rector, Deans, four faculty representatives, Heads of Research Centres/Laboratories and the Research Director. This is paralleled by a Research Commission under the auspices of the Senate. It was not clear to the Team what this dual committee process added to the research initiative of the University.

The University strategy has four distinct dimensions:
- identification and prioritisation of research topics
- harmonisation with European funding opportunities
- the development of a threefold approach based upon national requirements:
    - Research centres operating at a national level
    - Departmentally based research laboratories
    - Laboratories based in Faculties for the purposes of providing services to agencies and companies
- and technological transfer

The University is in a good position to exploit its potential for development across these four areas, since between 2005 and 2009 it has been able to build up its infrastructure through funds gained competitively throughout that period. However, it is now at a crossroads due to:
- Staffing issues: not only has there been a moratorium on appointments but the Ministry has established new criteria relating to *habilitation* (the designation required for PhD supervision). This has meant that some existing professors at 65 years of age with experience of PhD supervision are no longer able to take on new supervisions. (Currently 40% of the University's PhD supervisors are over 65 years old

and are therefore excluded from future supervision once their students have completed their PhDs).

- Staff seeking to take on, or continue, this role need to reorganise their work patterns/careers in order to gain habilitation which now requires a greater emphasis on citations (rather than publications *per se)* which clearly takes time to develop. The University is therefore faced with a difficult problem since PhD graduation is an important element of retaining the current categorization as a 'teaching and advanced research university' and the higher levels of finance that go with it.

- Funding issues: the University is faced with a significant downward trend in research income through State provision and competitive funding. While the law stipulates that research funding should be 1% of the higher education budget, in fact it was at only 0.32%. Whilst staff recognised the need to apply for such funding there is a general concern that the funds are not available. In addition, European research funding is becoming increasingly competitive. The University has five strategic EU partners with whom it is participating on Framework Programmes. However, it felt that it had less credibility since it is not leading the projects. The University is currently preparing staff to bid under Framework 8. Discussions have taken place with the European Commission in preparation for this and as a consequence research applications will be more applied in nature and preparatory work has begun with local farmers and practitioners. The Team wishes to acknowledge the University's international collaboration to date, but more will need to be accomplished. It commends the University's foresight in developing support mechanisms in relation to research applications and in preparing for future EU funded grant applications.

The University has undertaken an analysis of its infrastructure with a view to identifying what equipment and other resources are available to enable it to best re-position itself to provide technological transfer, consultancy and other services to the private sector (see section 5) and thereby increase its funding to support its research. The creation of the new Faculty of Food Science and Food Technology was an astute and timely strategic move in order to complete the key objectives of a modern life science university. It is still early days, however, and the step change in funding levels from these sources is still some way away. The University has also held meetings with the Ministry of Agriculture alongside four other institutions to discuss how best to sustain agricultural research in the context of an industry which will undergo massive changes over the next ten years.

It is clear to the Team that whilst a sound research infrastructure is in place, and staff well motivated, the decrease in national funding is a serious threat. Policies are being put in place including the use of the university's own internal grant competition for young teaching staff and the Innovation Voucher system designed to stimulate productive relationships with external agencies in business, industry and the professions.

However, there remains a need to make a renewed effort with an eye to the future and how to retain a reputation for research excellence and at the same time give greater priority to income generation through other sources. The latter will inevitably create pressure to divert resources (human and laboratory) towards consultancy and other services thereby weakening staff involvement in ISI publication, meeting habilitation criteria and undertaking pure research. In the view of the Team the University will need to focus its research activities on a narrower, targeted range of strategic niche areas in order to create critical mass. This will require some hard decisions but enable it to sustain a viable research profile in the future (see below and Section 5).

4.2   The Doctoral Schools

Under the freedoms provided by the new law, USAMV had decided to organise its PhD provision into two Doctoral Schools overseen by a Director and a Council: i) Engineering of Plant & Animal Resources and ii) Veterinary Medicine. Each School has a Council of its own comprising internal and external professors meeting habilitation criteria. Each PhD student is overseen by a supervisor and also 3-5 members of a research project group acting as tutors. This appears to be a suitable arrangement for effective support.

Students, who are able to teach up to six hours per week once in the second year, generally spoke warmly of the University and the processes of supervision. They valued the good relationship with staff, the support provided by project groups and the facilities available to them. On occasion it appeared that a student could undertake research in a group that lacked adequate financial resources to support them. The Doctoral School could perhaps become the coordinating mechanism to identify and overcome such problems as they arise. Students appreciated the generic and specialist training programmes that operated under the auspices of the Doctoral Schools although the Team felt that, given the nature of scientific research, it is important that research activity be undertaken immediately and not delayed until such training programmes are completed.

Under the new law a number of key areas are heavily regulated whereas in many national systems they are seen as a matter of academic autonomy and good practice. In addition to habilitation criteria and procedures, the law regulates the number of students who can be supervised by a single member of staff. This raises concern to the University as it has a direct impact upon the number of students that the University will be able to recruit given the changes to habilitation criteria. Programme structures are also regulated which inhibits interdisciplinarity and there remains a national registry of students so that all PhD students must be approved centrally and their theses assessed *via* a national commission.

PhD studies are permitted by full-time study only. This is regrettable because it excludes the development of PhD programmes closely integrated with the 'world of work' and prevents the innovative development of professional doctorates which exploit knowledge transfer potential.

The Team welcomed the SWOT that had been undertaken in relation to the Schools and the Director's aim to develop doctoral provision, enhance the international recognition of the Schools, strengthen the influence of the research groups and achieve greater funding for doctoral provision. The Team agrees with the University's analysis that the new regulations and worsening financial situation have changed the context in which the Doctoral Schools have been created and that therefore they are still 'works in progress' seeking to develop an appropriate framework within which doctoral studies can thrive in a European context. The Team's view is that ministry control over key areas of PhD provision remains an important constraint. Whilst there may be sound historical reasons for this (the control of private institutions) it is nevertheless something to which further thought might be given in order to strengthen academic freedom and encourage a culture of professionalism and responsibility.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- seek to resolve the research versus income generation dilemma by focusing more narrowly on targeted, strategic niche areas of research excellence so that:
  - ➢ research project groups with the best performance can be supported further;
  - ➢ weaker research project groups can be aligned in a mentoring relationship with stronger groups to lever up performance;
- establish more alliances with external researchers in basic Life Sciences;
- clarify the longer term objectives, functions, philosophy and services to students in its Doctoral Schools.

5. Service to society

The Team had an opportunity to meet a group of 20 representatives from the local business, professional and political community (some of whom were graduates of the University) and in addition members of two Commissions operating under the auspices of the Vice Rector Institutional Development, the University's Strategies Council and the Commission for Relations with the Economic Environment. It is likely that, at this stage, the influence of the international and Romanian representatives of these Councils in the development of the University has been limited but they provide a powerful basis for future consultation and the Team commends the establishment of these committees. External stakeholders collectively spoke warmly of the association with the University both in terms of the graduates who entered the employment market and the services to industry that the University could offer. The high level research activity and specialist life science laboratories were seen as a particular asset. Stakeholders identified a symbiotic relationship in that knowledge transfer was seen as operating in both directions. The external community also saw itself contributing to the work of the University in other ways, providing practical experience for graduates and training to complement theoretical studies. There is some concern that university bureaucracy has inhibited efficient collaboration in some areas and more could be done to influence university research projects by external stakeholders at all levels, but the Team commends the action of the University in creating two offices (Consultancy and Technology Transfer) to increase visibility and facilitate the interaction with the community.

As indicated above (section 4), the University faces an important dilemma in relation to the strategic balance it wishes to establish between its pure research on the one hand (important in terms of mission and international recognition) and activities related to applied research, consultancy, scientific services and knowledge transfer (important for regional recognition and income generation) on the other hand. Finances are tight and income streams, through competitive funding for research, precarious. State income is falling. The University will need to facilitate a broad internal and external discussion on this issue. It should also consider prioritising niche elements in its research activity and seek to maximise other income streams to enable a transfer of earned income to support its research mission (see section 4). Although the University has made strides in developing less competitive research areas into services and consultancies, much still needs to be done. There have been some achievements such as its success in attracting innovation vouchers. However, the SER figures demonstrate that income from private companies is still very low (and has declined over the 2009 – 2011 period) and this is reflected in the number of private companies with which the University has done business during this period.

The University has accomplished much in its close identification with Cluj-Napoca. It has developed a botanical garden and will soon open an extensive wooded park area to the public.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- continue to develop its efforts to collaborate with the Ministry of Agriculture, the chambers of agriculture and related organisations, in research and other academic activities;

- undertake this collaborative activity with a view to becoming more influential on agricultural policy issues.

6. Quality culture

6.1 Processes

The quality culture of the university is strong, enhanced by the newly created post of Vice Rector (Quality Assurance and Human Resources) which has been taken up by a recently appointed member of the Executive. Thus additional recognition has been given to the importance of this activity for the University. Continuous improvement is at the top of the agenda as can be seen from the history of the University's involvement with the EUA (2003), engagement with ISO 9001 and with ARACIS, the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency. The Vice Rector oversees the Quality Assurance Department (QAD), the Human Resources Policy Office, as well as Offices relating to Communications and Public Relations.

A Quality Assurance and Human Resources Council (chaired by the Vice Rector and comprising the Director of the QAD, the four Deans and four Faculty Quality Assurance representatives) oversees the quality assurance processes in the University. A key aim is to ensure that the framework for academic staff self-evaluation, evaluation by students, and departmental evaluation of academic staff are effectively integrated and acted upon. Currently academic staff also evaluate administrative services as part of the Senate's processes. The University has ISO 9001 recognition. The University is considering the involvement of administrative staff in the direct evaluation of academic departments.

The key body in the development of new teaching programmes at University level is the Council for Institutional Development, a sub-committee of the Executive's Administrative Council. New programmes were proposed, usually *via* Departments, to Faculty Councils and eventually endorsed by Senate, after being scrutinised by one of its sub-committees, before an approach to ARACIS for external approval. Changes to the curriculum are tracked through departmental procedures on an annual basis. Removing programmes from the University's offering is a matter of notifying the Ministry. The new law however, categorised 'study lines' pertinent to different faculties and hence proposals are only made by Faculties within this framework. The Team queried the necessity for this. In addition there is a national register of 6000 career titles, and programmes are restricted to these areas, thereby limiting creative responses to new markets and developing areas.

6.2 Evaluation

Quality Assurance representatives operate at both departmental and faculty levels and they play an important and commendable role in overseeing quality processes in the University. Evaluation of staff's teaching and research activity is undertaken annually.

Since 2008 an on-line system has enabled staff to build up a personal profile of research activity, publications, conference attendance etc. in the form of a self-evaluation. This is checked for accuracy at departmental level (through the QA representatives) and double checked at the University level *via* QAD. Staff are well engaged. They do not appear to consider the quality assurance systems a bureaucratic imposition and appear to see benefit in the administrative processes which are robust and efficient. In most respects, the quality management system has been enhanced by the use of IT.

It was difficult for the Team to identify how staff self-evaluation of *teaching* performance (as opposed to *research* performance which is more amenable to objective quantification) and student evaluation of teachers fed into the processes in a reliable and valid manner – important especially since a points system enables the top tier of 30% to receive an enhanced salary for twelve months. Peer group evaluation of teaching no longer takes place. Students, however, are requested to engage in the evaluation of staff, *via* an on-line system. Since its introduction the response rate (compared to the paper-based system) has diminished considerably and this has become a matter of concern (although not resolution) to the University and was identified in the SER - an illustration of the openness of its evaluation. Students and staff explained that there is no culture of participation of this kind in Romania and that the change from a paper-based system to an on-line system may have deterred some students concerned about anonymity. In addition the on-line system is 'less public' and therefore it is not possible to oversee the completion of the questionnaires. Any feedback from evaluation is given to students on the web. Currently the University is seeking solutions through enhanced electronic processes (despite the fact that responses had diminished since their introduction).

In the view of the Team the student feedback system is not effective. The University should consider with student representatives how best to enhance the feedback processes and use whatever methodology increases responses, especially since this is obligatory under article 303 of the new law.

The quality assurance and enhancement processes at faculty and departmental levels (through departmental representatives, Deans and Vice Deans) appear to be effective in maintaining quality and the Team is pleased to note that the processes at departmental level are not just about data collection but are used to take remedial actions. The Student Prefect and student representatives play an important role in quality assurance processes through departmental, faculty and senate committee processes. Reports from departments, as a result of the evaluation processes, are tracked through Departmental Councils, Faculty Councils and finally the Senate.

Whilst commending the activity undertaken at departmental and faculty levels in the monitoring and oversight of teaching and learning, this does not appear to be fully integrated into the QA processes at University level through the QAD. This is not centrally involved in the quality loop and therefore might not provide a complete picture across the academic arena of research, teaching and learning for the University as a whole.

6.3   Staff development

The University has a Department of Pedagogy with courses on teaching. All young assistants are required to undergo a compulsory course of training and the Rector had taken a particular interest in remedial processes that might be introduced as a result of consistently poor teacher evaluations. It is the Dean's responsibility to confront any issues relating to poor teaching in younger or more senior colleagues.

The Team recommends that the University,should:

- as a matter of urgency, overcome the low response rates in student evaluations of teachers and teaching, which is obligatory by law (article 303). Note: quick and effective solutions are not necessarily IT driven;
- ensure that the QAD plays a more central part in the reporting loop on the quality of teaching and learning in departments, in order to ensure that at University level there is a complete picture of quality across all aspects of provision.

7. Internationalisation

Until recently one Vice Rector had responsibility for both Research and International provision but in recognition of the significance of both these elements of the Strategic Plan a new Vice Rector had recently been given responsibility for international matters. The Vice Rector (International Relations) chaired the International Relations Council (a sub-committee of the Administrative Council). In parallel with this, the Senate had an International Relations and Relations with Business Environment Commission. It was not clear what this dual committee process added to the international development of the University.

Critical financial factors and a declining birthrate place the University in a situation which is increasingly competitive. The international strategy is part of the University's response to this changing situation spearheaded through the International Relations Office and the Community Programmes (EU) Office. A significant development within the University is the teaching of complete programmes through the medium of English or French as a means of attracting overseas students. Currently six programmes are delivered wholly in those languages. The team felt that the decision to teach a number of programmes in this way demonstrated a high level of commitment to the international strategy, especially in terms of the financial and human resource investment required. French and English lessons were also offered to staff. The level of English speaking amongst the students and younger staff seen by the Team is good but amongst older professors it is more limited. This prompted the somewhat liberal use of interpreters during the visit. Informal support from university staff with a language facility, for those less accustomed to English, would have been as effective. The University is commended for its policies to enhance foreign language teaching and for its strategy to attract more international students (currently 166 students from 22 countries). The University had engaged agents in Israel, Tunisia and Morocco with a view to increasing recruitment especially to the Veterinary Medicine programmes. The international engagement of the University in Europe was further strengthened by its programme of extension studies in Viterbo in Italy with specialisations authorized by the Romanian National Agency for Quality Assurance.

Mobility through the Erasmus Programme provided an important element of the University's strategy for internationalisation. Both students and staff alike identified financial difficulties as inhibiting students' mobility under this project, and which is likely to worsen as the Ministry seeks changes as from June 2012 in the money that is available for mobility purposes. In the past there had also been a problem with credit recognition on return but students felt that the new system - by which the tutors sign to guarantee compatibility (overseen by the Recognition and Equivalence Centre) - is more effective.

Numbers remain small – only 52 outgoing in 2011 - especially at Master's level although it became clear that figures presented in the SER underestimated the actual levels of movement. For example, Erasmus Mundus, PhD students and researchers supported by research or Doctoral School grants had not been included. The team advised that the University might wish to explore organisations such as the Erasmus Student Network as a means of increasing student mobility.

The University provides good service for incoming international students who are given priority in accommodation (which is shared but could be for individual use if paid for), met at the airport, provided with peer tutoring and an Erasmus club to facilitate cultural integration. Students who had benefited from mobility opportunities spoke enthusiastically of their experiences, comparing USAMV favourably with universities abroad. They felt it enhanced career prospects.

Additional documentation provided by the University indicated that income, both through the European Fund grants (PhD and postdoctoral) and from International Research Funds had risen over the period to 2010 but have taken a sharp downward turn in 2011. These figures are cause for considerable concern. This reinforces the view of the Team (sections 4 and 5) that a considerable re-focusing of research priorities and targeted income generation through alternative sources is required. Nevertheless those with responsibilities for international development have a considerable part to play in publicising the results of research activity in the University internationally, attracting successful collaborative partnerships with European and other Universities, and in creating a climate in which a reduced but excellent research focus can attract funding.

The Team recommends that the University should:

- further develop processes to enhance international research collaborations;
- present its data on mobility more accurately (not only focusing on Erasmus) given its importance in their international strategy and in enhancing the reputation of the university;
- develop strategies to enhance participation in Erasmus programmes.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

The University is an institution of high standing in Romania and is making significant progress towards its international and research goals. However, like all Romanian universities it is facing considerable challenges, many of them from external sources but some internally. With its very supportive students, highly committed staff and energetic Rectorate, which has the support of the academic community in the joint pursuit of corporate goals, it has the potential to thrive. There is much to be commended as detailed in this report. However, its capacity to meet the severe challenges of the next few years is limited by its internal organisational processes (not necessarily all of its own choice) and by externally imposed hurdles and bureaucracy. It is not unique in this. However, as an institution pursuing a mission which embraces an international perspective and excellence in research, the implications are perhaps more significant.

The Team offers the following recommendations designed to support the University in the next phase of its development.

The Team recommends that:
> the Executive, with the Senate, should continue their close internal collaboration in the pursuit of corporate goals but develop clear terms of reference for its committees and individuals in order to avoid future conflict and to speed up internal decision-making;

The Team recommends that the University should:
   i.   find creative ways to:

        a.   establish substructures which are stream-lined;
        b.   identify processes which do not require parallel tracking of issues develop institutional practices which allow decision making to be fast and focused;

   ii.   identify some institutions outside Romania with similar missions to benchmark against and to review the style of presentation, and processes for the creation, of their strategic plans;

   iii.   distil the current Strategic Plan into a longer term focused strategy, identifying its major themes based on the vision that the University has of itself and its judgment of priorities;

   iv.   extract a more detailed, short term, action plan from the Strategic Plan in order to provide a basis for the subsequent monitoring of milestones;

v. seek to enhance its staff development activities with a view to maintaining or enhancing its current position among Romanian universities;

vi. seek to develop proactive strategies and innovative solutions internally to overcome externally created constraints;

vii. in collaboration with other Romanian universities, businesses and other stakeholders, press the case for change so that international best practice can be adopted to the benefit of Romania more widely;

viii. focus on diversifying income streams as a major theme in strategic planning;

ix. develop ways to overcome what appears to be an excessive drop-out rate during both the first year and at Master's level, for example, mid-term student assessments in order to monitor individual progress, notwithstanding the fact that students can have dual enrolment;

x. consider providing the student body, through the Student Prefect, with adequate resources to complete the important tasks expected of it;

xi. seek to resolve the research versus income generation dilemma by focusing more narrowly on strategic niche areas of research excellence so that:
   a. research project groups with the best performance can be supported further;
   b. weaker research project groups can be aligned in a mentoring relationship with stronger groups to lever up performance;

xii. establish more alliances with external researchers in basic Life Sciences;

xiii. clarify the longer term objectives, functions, philosophy and services to students in its Doctoral Schools;

xiv. continue to develop its efforts to collaborate with the Ministry of Agriculture, the chambers of agriculture and related organisations in research and other academic activities;

xv. undertake this collaborative activity with a view to becoming more influential on agricultural policy issues;

xvi.   as a matter of urgency, overcome the low response rates in student evaluations of teachers and teaching, which is obligatory by law (article 303). Note: quick and effective solutions are not necessarily IT driven;

xvii.   ensure that the QAD plays a more central part in the reporting loop on the quality of teaching and learning in Departments, in order to ensure that at University level there is a complete picture of quality across all aspects of provision;

xviii.   further develop processes to enhance international research collaborations;

xix.   present its data on mobility more accurately (not only focusing on Erasmus) given its importance in their international strategy and in enhancing the reputation of the university;

xx.   develop strategies to enhance participation in Erasmus programmes.