

The West University of Timișoara

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the IEP evaluation of the West University of Timișoara (WUT) in Romania. The evaluation took place in 2010. The first evaluation visit was organised on 24-26 February; the second visit took place on 24-27 May, 2010. The report is based on the insights gained from the information provided in the WUT self-evaluation report and the additional materials prepared by the University. It was complemented with the interviews which were conducted with around 300 representatives of the university community during the two site visits. The reports of the IEP must rely on what the Team was told and what they saw during the visits. The Team has also seen and studied the Salzburg Seminar Evaluation Report (SSER) undertaken at WUT on 24 October 2002 which gave the Team some broader view to the processes running at the University and especially about the inertia which, in some cases, slows down the necessary reforms needed to enhance the quality of the processes of a University.

1.1 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 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 Name of the institution and the national context

The West University of Timișoara is one of the four largest universities in Romania and is located in the Western part of the country. It was founded in 1944 by Royal Decree as a Higher Institute of

Education and was transformed into a University in 1962. During the Ceausescu Regime, the faculties of fine arts, music, physical education and sports, chemistry, and natural sciences were closed. The faculty of philology was restricted to only a few domains. After the change of Regime in 1989, the faculties were re-opened. In the meantime other new faculties were established (e.g. the Faculty of Economic Sciences). Currently, the University has more than 23 000 students and consists of eleven faculties and the departments of lifelong learning and teacher training. The WUT belongs to the Romanian university *Universitaria* Consortium alongside the universities of Babes Bolyai Cluj Napoca, Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iasi, The Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest, and The University of Bucharest.

Its major mission is to serve the community and the region through teaching, research and service to the community. Given the backdrop of Romanian higher education regulation the West University of Timisoara is facing limited room for manoeuvre when it comes to certain areas of activities, such as staffing and financing. At the same time, the impact of a degree of deregulation, Romania's entry into the EU and the increasing availability of EU Structural Funds provide clear opportunities for the University to harness its potential and to increase the quality of its teaching provision and research, to strengthen its collaborations and to become an integral part of the European Higher Education Area.

The WUT is located in the Western part of Romania, a region with food, chemical, textile, electronic, mechanical manufacturing and wood processing industries. Historically, Timisoara has been a trade centre and a multi-cultural city. It is a student city: besides the WUT, it also has other higher education institutions, such as the Medical and Agricultural academies, the polytechnic as well as some private higher education institutions.

The IEP Team witnessed the changing legal environment of the WUT in action during its visits, when the new Higher Education Law was being debated in the Parliament and the salary cuts of academic staff were becoming a reality as a result of the cuts in public expenditure in Romania due to the economic recession.

Romanian higher education regulation has been marked by a number of laws. In 1995 a Law on Education was passed (Law no. 84/1995) followed in 1997 by the Statute of Teaching Staff (Law no. 128/1997). Student representation was one of the important innovations in higher education governance as foreseen in the Law on Education no 84/1995. According to the Law, nearly 25% of all the managing bodies of the universities must be composed of students. They must also be included in the Ethics Commissions and in the Quality Assurance Commissions.

The Education Law (Law no.84/1995) has undergone several changes over the years. The changes in 1997 increased the autonomy of universities and restructured the university funding mechanism. The bulk of the funds are generated on the basis of a formula allocation, the main criterion being the number of students. Budgetary funds are allocated as a block grant, and the university has the right to decide on its internal allocation. It is the responsibility of the Senate to determine the financial policies of a university, although the formal approval of the Ministry is required. Tuition fees are determined by the university itself (there is no ceiling determined by the state as to how much the university can charge).

Up to 1997 the Ministry of Education and Science decided upon the staffing levels, and universities were funded according to the number of teaching and administrative staff positions approved by the Ministry. After 1997 the staffing levels and human resources management policies have been established by the Senate of the university. The new posts are proposed by the faculties and approved by the faculty council and in the end, approved by the Senate. However, as the Team witnessed during the visits, the salary levels are determined by the university according to the national salary scales. The Ministerial commission determines the employment criteria of academic staff. For example, a university can hire a person as a professor if s/he fulfils these criteria and the candidate's level is assessed by a university and is endorsed by the Ministerial commission (the commission is made up of professors from accredited public and private universities). So, although the law in theory allows the university to establish staffing levels, the Ministry still has the control of the process.

Another important change in the 1995 Law was in the sphere of lifelong learning regulation since this did not exist as such before. Lifelong learning is the subject of a separate Law, no. 375/2002, which sets the legal framework for education providers to offer such services.

Student access has also been decentralised since 1996 when universities received full autonomy in determining the criteria for student selection and admission to higher education institutions. Universities decide on the number of fee-paying students and base these decisions mainly on merit. The introduction of a new study programme in the 1990s provided the means to strengthen the position of some faculties as well as the means to increase the funds coming from the state budget (De Boer *et al.*, 2010).

As a result, since 1995 the governance of the higher education system in Romania has moved towards a more decentralised model. Even though the main governing body for higher education still remains the Ministry for Education and Science, which finances and supervises the activities of universities and other higher education institutions, a number of other agencies have been founded at national level (de Boer *et al.*, 2010).

The National Council for Higher Education Financing (CNFIS) is responsible for financial assessments of the needs of higher education institutions. It acts as a consultative body for the Ministry of Education and Research; it prepares the methodology for funding universities and proposes the budgetary allocations for universities. It also provides yearly reports on the financial needs of public universities and other types of higher education institution.

The National Council for Scientific Research in Higher Education (CNCSIS) is a state-run agency which operates under the coordination of the Ministry for Education and Research. Its main objective is to finance scientific research undertaken by universities and other higher education institutions.

In 2005 the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) was established. In addition to the external accreditation carried out by the Agency all universities are required to develop their own internal quality assurance procedures.

A further change to the HE regulations took place in 2004. Law no.288/2004, which introduced the three-tier degree system and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), was a significant step in the integration of the Romanian higher education system into the European Higher Education Area. Further change was introduced in 2005 to fight corruption in academia. According to the Order of the Minister of Education and Research in 2005 each institution must establish an Ethical Commission to deal with those cases in which ethical norms are violated.

1.3 The Self-Evaluation Process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a specially created team at the Rectorate level consisting of academic staff, Master and PhD students mainly from the Faculties of Economics and Business Administration, with some also from Law, Letters and Sociology led by Prof. Liliana Donath. The Self-evaluation Report (SER) is a **comprehensive, informative, frank and open** document. However, a very important part of the SER, the **SWOT analysis**, was missing. Additional data and materials, including the SWOT analysis, were provided to the Team on request before the main visit. The self-evaluation process involved discussions of the self-evaluation team with different faculties of the university and different Vice-Rectors. The self-evaluation report was prepared on time and approved by the Senate and the Rector.

Unfortunately, because before the first visit the SER was not translated into Romanian and was not distributed across the University, the WUT community was largely unaware of the self-evaluation process that had taken place at their university or of the University-wide problems and goals which were identified in the SER. Nevertheless, some of the WUT staff the Team met were informed about the content of SER. This seems to indicate some **communication problems across the University** and that the evaluation and preparation of SER was a **top-down process** which also shows that the quality assurance team working on the university level is not very well known at the faculty level and cooperation in quality assurance matters between those levels does not seem to be satisfactory. As the Team learned before the second visit the SER was translated and posted on the University website and this had a positive impact on the evaluation process as was obvious to the Team during the main visit.

1.4 The Evaluation Team (later Team)

The Evaluation Team consisted of:

- Prof. F. Devinsky, Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia (chair)
- Prof. R. Lewis, Open University, United Kingdom
- Prof. Ö. Vardar, Işık University, Turkey
- Ms A. Blaettler, student, European Students' Union
- Dr. L. Leisyte, University of Twente, the Netherlands (team coordinator)

The IEP Team is most grateful for the hospitality shown by the University, the excellent organisation of the two visits as well as the open and frank atmosphere, which Rector Prof. Dr. Ioan Talpoş and his team created. The enthusiasm of the Rector, Prof. Liliana Donath and of the self-evaluation team, the

overwhelmingly positive reactions of the students about their University, the frank and open discussions with teachers and staff, and the generally positive attitude to the IEP evaluation greatly facilitated our work. The IEP Team would especially like to thank Prof. Liliana Donath and her team who organised our visits to WUT in a most efficient manner and who provided all the information which the Team requested. We thank also everyone who gave us their assistance and without whom our task could not have been completed.

2. Norms, values, mission, goals: What is the institution trying to do?

The Self-evaluation report of WUT (SER) sets out the Mission of the University which can be found in the Charter of the WUT as well as its present Strategy 2008-2012. From our point of view, it could well be the motto for WUT: **“To serve the community and the region through teaching and research and arts - Aiming for the Peak of Quality”**. The mission statement implies that WUT wants to be a democratic University with high quality education, research, and culture and would like to be integrated into the EHEA while preserving its national identity. Or, as the Rector’s managerial programme catchwords state: **“For a dynamic, performing and competitive University inside the EU”**.

As the largest and most renowned University of the Western part of Romania and a member of the Consortium of Romania’s biggest universities, shouldering its responsibility for the future of the country, the WUT has not only the opportunity, but also the duty, to invent and follow high quality research, teaching processes for the benefit of the region and the country. We, however, believe that a **more elaborate stand-alone mission statement** (possibly as an addendum to the Charter) would certainly help to keep the University on the right track. We recommend the University think about the preparation of an amended **mission statement** and a **separate vision of the University** which will also reflect its policy concerning the adoption of the Bologna process. At the same time, we advise it to **prepare the mission statements of individual faculties and institutes**, which, while reflecting the specific character of individual subunits, will be consistent with the general mission of the University considering Romania’s changed international situation as a new member of the EU.

Commonly, an organisation can try to achieve its mission and vision in 4 strategic steps:

- Identifying a series of objectives or goals
- Putting in place a strategic development plan to achieve these objectives or goals
- Putting in place structures and processes through which to implement this plan
- Creating activities that fulfil the objectives

The translation of a modern University’s mission and vision into activities such as teaching and research programmes is commonly articulated in a strategic development plan. **The WUT Strategy 2008-2012 and the Rector’s managerial plan** lacked a **detailed financial plan** which **must be** an inseparable part of the Strategic development plan. Although the Rector’s strategy and vision was accepted by the University - as evidenced by his election as Rector -, the plan has to be reviewed and refined every year. The Rector’s managerial plan presented in the SER is very ambitious with a large number of targets. Let us mention also that the SER was “concerned that the University is attempting to do too much in too many areas”. We can fully agree with the SER outcomes that, **with existing resources, not even part of the goals can be achieved**. Fortunately, the WUT top management is aware of this problem and according to the SER it understands that the operational plan should be tightly connected to the financial planning of the University.

Therefore we recommend that a **University-wide discussion should start** and agreement should be reached on a **few basic carefully chosen priorities and attainable goals. A detailed and realistic**

financial plan with concrete sums allocated to each project should be approved. Similarly the faculties should elaborate their own individual strategic plans in concert with the University one. For the cohesion of the University it is essential to have one or two **cross-university projects** where all the faculties and institutions are involved. It is of course up to the WUT to select and decide such projects. One of them could be, for example, the **systematic introduction of curricula which are comparable and compatible with those used in the European HE Area**. The second project could be the **elaboration of a university-wide comprehensive quality assurance and enhancement system**. For example, the student evaluation form is good but not sufficient since it does not get followed up systematically and no specific procedures to monitor the quality of research have been developed by the University. A **Student Survey** conducted by the Student Union (OSUT) in 2009 is a good example of how to proceed and such a survey should be regularly undertaken.

Despite the change in the HE funding mechanism in Romania towards lump sum budget allocation, **governmental control** seems to be a serious constraint when it comes to University expenditures and staffing. The disparity between the University's autonomy to earn its funding and its autonomy to spend it in the way that best serves the University, points to the need to decrease governmental control. There is a real danger that the University will not retain sufficient autonomy with the consequent risk to its academic freedom. However, it must not forget that the price of autonomy is accountability.

3. Governance and activities: How is the institution trying to do it?

3.1 Governance

WUT comprises eleven faculties and employs 776 academic staff and 352 administrative staff. In addition, it has the department of Life Long Learning and Open Distance Learning, Teacher Training Department and Department of International Relations as well as 24 research centres. The governance of WUT is collegial, with all the internal stakeholders represented, including the students. The Team observed that external stakeholders are not present in the governing of the university, neither at the central level, nor at the faculty level.

The major regulatory document of the WUT is the University Charter (approved on 25 June 2009). Within the state regulatory framework the WUT has a certain degree of autonomy. Its internal governance structure consists of the top management, which is the Rector, the Senate Office and general administrative director of WUT as well as the Senate and the Senate Board. The present Rector and the Vice-Rectors were elected in 2008. The Senate is the supreme collegial governing body (the latest Senate was elected in 2008), which consists of the Rector, Vice-Rectors, the Chancellor, Deans, Vice-Deans, students and elected members academic staff from all faculties. The Rector is accountable to the Senate for his/her activities. The Academic Council is an advisory body to the Senate on academic matters. The WUT charter aims at decentralisation of powers to the faculty Councils, the Deans and the Chairs of Departments. The faculties have autonomy to create study programmes and to manage their budget. As indicated in SER (p. 11), the Dean is the manager of the faculty together with vice deans ensuring the daily management of the faculty and they are accountable to the Faculty Council. The Team observed a high degree of decentralisation while visiting various faculties at the WUT.

Students are represented in all governing bodies at different levels of the WUT as stipulated by the national regulation. The Team had an impression that, although the students formally represent their rights in the WUT governing bodies, they do not necessarily communicate the issues discussed with the broader student community. It is disturbing that nearly **50% of interviewed students did not know about their representation** in the Senate of University and the Faculty Councils. This indicates that an infrastructure where student participation is fostered through the university in a more broad sense than just formal representation of students on different bodies would be beneficial.

All the decisions of any kind at University level affect the students. Therefore their participation in all decision-making must be secured. The **role of students at the University governance** is, according to the Team view, consistent with the aims of the Bologna process: **students and staff should act as full partners in the HE governance**. The team encourages the University, in the future, to follow the strong recommendation of the Bologna process that it is extremely desirable to have a strong participation of active students in the University decision-making bodies and decision-making processes at all levels, if possible with **voting rights**. **In order to achieve this, the student participation culture should be enhanced across the WUT.**

Many students complained of the **lack of information** and WUT should review the **effectiveness of the means by which it communicates with students**.

3.2 Activities

3.2.1. Teaching

WUT offers study programmes at three cycle levels following the Bologna study structure: Bachelors, Masters and PhD. The study programmes are offered mostly in Romanian although some examples of foreign language courses were found (e.g. Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science (English), Faculty of Music (German), Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy and Communication (German). Life long learning and distance learning is offered through the Department of Life Long Learning and Open Distance Learning which offer short, on demand courses to professionals as well as degree programmes which are mainly taught to professionals at weekends. The quality of teaching is monitored through student evaluations. Study programmes are also reviewed through self-evaluation as organised by each department and, according to the WUT Charter, funding can be withdrawn when the performance is not adequate (SER, p. 8). Teaching staff are requested to undertake teacher training courses. The study programmes have to be accredited and are evaluated by ARACIS on a constant basis.

An objective of the University Strategic development plan should be effectively to **transform the existing study courses** and to introduce a portfolio of academic programmes that are in line with the law, current education trends and the Bologna recommendations. Our evaluation indicates that a good number of staff has **difficulties in accepting, implementing and, most importantly, understanding the Bologna process and need further assistance.**

Study programmes tend to be oriented towards a certain domain: mathematics, computer science, physics, letters, history, theology, chemistry, biology, geography, economics, sociology, law and administrative science, political sciences, philosophy, communication sciences. There is limited exchange between different programmes and different faculties, interdisciplinary programmes are rare. In the academic year 2009/2010 WUT enrolled 21484 students. 80% of the total student body is enrolled at the undergraduate degree level, 16% at Master's level, and 4% at the PhD level. The Bachelor degree is attained in three years (except in Law and Music, where it lasts four years). The Master lasts two years.

As indicated in the SER, some classrooms have been upgraded with the latest equipment to provide for the use of technology in teaching. During the visits, the Team witnessed that some of the rooms have indeed been renovated, although some of them still seem to be in a rather poor condition and students expressed concerns about that. Since the campus has been renovated in stages, it can take time to finalise this process. The Rector presented the future campus plans to the Team. The university central library has undergone a change towards being a public library of national importance which is independent from the university and financed externally. The Team observed that the process of merging the old university library with the new one is still in progress, the digitalisation of materials is taking time. The resources, including access to 455 databases through the Intranet, are available to the university community. Students expressed their concerns about the opening hours of the library since many of them are working and they could not easily access the library in late evening hours or at weekends.

Internationalisation is important to the University. It has a number of bilateral agreements with foreign universities; however, the **mobility of students and staff remains rather low**. The WUT has introduced the ECTS system and provides Diploma Supplements. The IEP team **recommends enhancing international exchanges by eliminating the possible barriers to mobility, such as the low curriculum flexibility**. The University should **ensure the transferability of the ECTS** from abroad so that **students would not need to take additional examinations upon their return to the University**. Students also expressed concerns about the lack of information about possibilities for mobility and possible sources of funding.

Moreover, the Team strongly recommends the University leadership to define as one of its very high priorities the strengthening of student exchanges through international programmes such as **ERASMUS and provide WUT students in all faculties with the necessary information via the International Office** since students from different faculties reported a lack of information regarding possibilities of mobility.

A crucial point of the Bologna process is the **mobility of staff and students**. The review Team formed the impression that, generally **such mobility at WUT is rather low, especially at the Master and PhD levels**. The short conference trips for staff and students could not be compared with a longer-term teaching, research or study activities abroad and in many cases staff do not even get funds for short conference trips.

Many of the problems could be solved if the University had a **strategic plan for international relations** of the University. Therefore, the existing **60 bilateral agreements** of the WUT with international universities **should be reviewed taking into account its strategic goals**.

The Team often heard the refrain that the **teaching load is too high**. This is an old problem, also mentioned in the Salzburg Seminar report in 2002. The Team recommends that the University undertake a detailed review of the teaching staff workload and, in some specialisations, **lower the number of teaching contact hours** to an acceptable value. This will create some space for teaching staff to engage in other activities such as research.

Involving practitioners in teaching at the University could help to make the courses attractive from the practical point of view and further lower the teaching load of the regular staff. In some areas the involvement of practitioners is inhibited by the unhelpful requirement that teachers at the university should be in possession of a PhD.

Nevertheless, there are some contradictions mentioned in the SER between overloading of teachers and strategic priorities which say that one of the objectives of the strategy of the University should be "to attract as many students as possible". The University should **decide, and then follow, a clear strategy in the matter**.

If the WUT wants to be competitive in education in the EHEA, it should change its education philosophy. **The Team recommends WUT increase its focus on student-centred learning and reduce teaching whilst becoming more innovative in designing the curricula**. Therefore, WUT should

describe the learning outcomes very carefully. This will also allow the reduction of contact hours which can, but do not always have to, be the best mode of education for the learning process.

A significant number of students were concerned about the teaching methods, believing that the courses should be more interactive and updated so as to make them more relevant to practice. Student training, besides the subject content, should include the **development of soft skills**: presentations, CV writing and other job seeking and professional life-related skills. Connection to practice is paramount and in line with the Bologna objectives and the Team commends the University programmes which have inbuilt practical training components. The Team **recommends an increase in the flexibility of the study programmes**.

The Team observed a limited amount of inter-faculty cooperation with reduced possibilities for students to take free elective courses. It is strongly recommended that the University **develop and implement at University level joint programmes between faculties**. Cooperation must go beyond the mere sharing of electives. This can reduce the duplication of teaching and establish the situation where one faculty teaches the general courses (e.g. mathematics, languages) for the whole University as well as to enhance interdisciplinary study offerings.

The Team recommends the permeation of faculty boundaries so that more exchange and cross-fertilisation between the faculties could take place which would enhance the programme offerings as well as increasing the attractiveness of the programmes. The Team advises WUT **to increase the cross-faculty cooperation initiatives, such as joint study or research programmes**. The University needs to lower the barriers for change and open its faculties inside the University to create a common sense of belonging.

The WUT situation with the possible shortage of students (due to demography trends) and the desire to provide a service to the community could probably be partly solved by **distance education and life-long learning**. The Team believes that this policy could and should play a key role in developing a lifelong learning culture at WUT and in the region. The University has a good starting position with its Department of Lifelong Learning and Open Distance Learning.

The Team encourages the University **to monitor and analyse labour market trends** especially when it comes to **present and future demand for its graduates**.

Stakeholder presence should be enhanced both at the curriculum development level in different faculties as well as in the governance of the institution, and the university should strengthen its connections with the local community and regional business and industry. The meeting with stakeholders pointed to the underlying potential and their willingness (most of them were alumni) to contribute to the University development and its regional presence. The University could be **more pro-active in the market and open to the needs of the local economy**. For example, the Team **recommends WUT establish a freely accessible career centre (providing free services) fully funded by the University and accessible to all students**. This centre would provide, on campus, advice and guidance to students on career possibilities. The students thought that other higher education institutions in the area are doing more in this area to help graduates obtain employment (e.g. the local polytechnic).

3.2.2 Research

The WUT Strategy 2008-2012 points to research as a part of the University's mission. The university management during our interviews emphasised the ambitious goal to improve University's position in the world rankings to be among the top 500 (SER, p.24) and this was clear from the SER as well. The WUT strategy notes that the University, among other things, aims to promote excellence, reward best articles, grant 20 postdoctoral scholarships, and create better resources for laboratories.

Looking at the research grants, the number has increased in the period from 2004 to 2008, nationally from 36 to 111 and internationally from 10 to 23. Although the absolute numbers are not very high, the fact that there is a marked increase in the number of grants shows the research potential of the University. Another important indicator of research activity, publications, has increased as well. The number of articles for example in ISI journals has increased from 102 in 2007 to 179 in 2008 (SER, Appendix 2.7b). The number of books has kept fluctuating around 200 per year. There has been a sharp increase in the number of doctoral theses produced from 2007 - 52 to 2008 - 80 (*Ibid.*). Research takes place in departments, since the academic staff contracts include both teaching and research. Research also takes place in 24 research centres which are located in different faculties.

The major sources of income for research are national grants from the government and international funding. For example, a couple of faculties (e.g. Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science) have been active in attracting external grant funding, such as NATO grants or European Framework programmes. Currently, the academic staff and the management are eager to tap into the Structural Funds funding for research as our interviews indicated.

As in teaching activities, the Team observed that researchers' international mobility is rather limited. There is no funding for attending conferences, promotion of young scholars, and seed capital for starting up research projects or any other internal funds to help researchers to initiate international projects. Attendance at international conferences is limited due to the lack of funds. During the interviews, academic staff indicated that the Department of International Relations helps with technical support for international projects, but a more structured support of project writing is not available at the central university level. Some faculties have indicated that they have in-house 'know-how' and help to draw up projects in their faculty. This shows that there is limited inter-faculty cooperation in the matter and a limited capacity for such an important service at the University central level.

Speaking about research in the context of limited resources, the trends of globalisation, and the Lisbon Declaration, the Team considers it to be especially necessary for the WUT to have a **University-wide research policy paper**. The research objectives should be included in the University Strategic plan and should define the research areas in which efforts should be concentrated. Such a **University policy should indicate clear sustainable priorities** concerning the development of research at WUT. The policy and priorities should also show **how the research is related to the educational process**, in order to ensure that research activity results are implemented into research-based education and teaching.

The Team also considers that the development of these priorities should be based on the **University's own criteria and needs**. WUT has many excellent professors who gained experience abroad at top quality institutions and are publishing in top international journals. So WUT already possesses a good pool of experienced people.

The WUT research strategy should also **foster the collaboration between different departments** to attempt to generate critical mass in research and, if possible, the **targeted recruitment of new research staff** in identified prioritised areas.

The project of **performance-based rewarding (and the Team would like to stress that this should not only relate to research but rather take into account teaching as well)** should be implemented across the University.

The Team has been somewhat surprised by the fact that only a very small portion (3,9%) of WUT's total budget, (forecast for 2010; reality in 2009 = 2,8%) should be assigned to research and development. The Team believes that there is a huge room for strategic growth here. **The Team recommends** that the University take a **more active role in acquiring research funds from abroad**. The participation in European programmes such as the **7th Framework Programme** could be a way. The Team recommends the leadership of the WUT to maintain and further strengthen an effective Department of International Relations, in order to help the researchers technically prepare their projects, especially EU ones.

The review Team believes that **supporting young researchers** is a good tool to form a pool of young high-quality people of which the University can take advantage. 4,4% PhD students out of all of the WUT students (936 out of 21 484 in 2009) is well below an acceptable critical mass. Unfortunately the trend during the last 4 years has not changed significantly. The Team recommends that the University take **measures to increase the number of quality PhD students**, for example by using its own grant schemes.

To support research activities at the University the Team recommends the introduction of a scheme of **seed money for research** at WUT and **recommends that the University introduce its own research support scheme especially for young researchers; it should also** establish an internal research grant system and do more to facilitate conference attendance.

The SER **provided limited data** on the financial situation at the University. Upon request some data were provided to the Team which showed that, given the fact that the income is generated through different sources, the **budget income is diversified** and no donor has a major influence. This is good for the autonomy of the University. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the state regulations relating how to use the finances are restrictive. According to the additional data provided to the Team and interviews with financial officers of the University, the WUT, unlike most of the other HEIs, **appears to be in a stable financial position, generating surplus** in the budget. However, the **financial constraints** were mentioned across the University as one of the major concerns. Although the lump sum allotted by the state to the faculties is mainly dependent on the number of students, neither the SER, nor the additional documents provide any plan for alleviating the situation which leads to huge **massification of education** which, in turn, inevitably leads to lowering the quality of teaching and

research. Permanently living under such a pressure is not motivating. The Team recommends the WUT draw up a **comprehensive plan supporting the increase of the research income** from external contracts and international grants.

The Team commends the University leadership's initiative to **establish an Alumni centre** and encourages it to start a **country-wide campaign** to address the whole population and all firms and **contact University alumni** as well, with the aim of collecting funds for the University. Bringing the local community and University Alumni in can be a fruitful way forward to increase contract research with industry and business. The Team witnessed a close link with employers and other stakeholders during the meeting with stakeholders. They are proud of WUT and are willing to contribute to its development. This is a brilliant opportunity for the WUT to harness this potential.

4. Quality assessment practices: How does the institution know it works?

The WUT established the Quality Assessment and Assurance Department in 2009. Its aim is to establish quality assurance procedures within the University and help the institution to accredit its programmes. As indicated in the SER, the first attempts to introduce quality assurance procedures at the WUT started with the establishment of the Quality Council in 2005. The Council worked together with the quality assurance commissions set up in each faculty. It produced a first draft of the quality procedures manual. In 2009 this Council was reorganised into the Department of Quality Assessment and Assurance, which later in 2010, between the Team's visits, was renamed as the Department of Quality Management (DQM). This Department is managed by a Director, Prof. Liliana Donath as appointed by the Senate on 27 May 2009. The DQM has a permanent office and a broad portfolio and coordinates six commissions covering various areas, such as the yearly evaluation of the academic and administrative staff, curriculum assessment, student surveys (SER, p. 20). The evaluation of all study programmes started in the autumn of 2009 following the rules set up by the committee for curriculum assessment of the Quality Management Department.

The current quality assurance system in the Romanian HE sector is primarily based on external evaluation and accreditation of programmes by **ARACIS**. The Team acknowledges that the quality assurance system is already developing in some parts of WUT. ARACIS undertakes programme accreditation as well as institutional evaluation. It undertook the WUT institutional evaluation in the same semester as the Team's visits took place. The Team was concerned that this might, on the one hand, result in overloading the Department of Quality Assurance while, on the other, result in a lack of ownership of the institutional self-evaluation process on the part of the whole institution. The Team **recommends the WUT leadership implement the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area"** and to do its best to achieve the correct balance between external and internal quality assurance.

This process began with the creation of the Department of Quality Assessment and Assurance (DQAA) in 2005 (now the Department of Quality Management (DQM)). However, the repeated reorganisations of such an important office could have an inhibiting effect on the institutionalisation of the quality assurance system in the university. The Team recognises that, given the present constraints, the short-term solution of giving the role of the quality coordinator to the University Chancellor is viable. However, the Team strongly recommends that WUT institutionalise quality assurance by **appointing a Vice-Rector** specifically responsible for quality assurance within the University.

The Team commends the openness with which the newly created Department of Quality Management has embraced the challenging task of undertaking the self-evaluation of the University and has worked in partnership with different faculties. The DQM currently has two full-time staff members and volunteers, which the Team finds rather limited given the broad activity portfolio of the Department. Building the capacity and expertise of the DQM through training and through the provision of **substantial financial and human resources such as internships would be beneficial** to the whole University. Introducing the quality assurance system in the University at all levels and **training the faculty staff** responsible for quality assurance would help the University to monitor itself

and to improve. This should include institutionalising the internal monitoring systems that track the drop-out rates and time to degree rates of students.

The Team strongly supports the project of DQM and recommends that their activities should be an important objective of the University strategic plan. The Team recommends the **design and implementation of an ongoing quality assurance and quality enhancement system**, primarily for the areas of teaching, research and University administration. In order for this to function effectively it is central that the University level activity on quality assurance and the faculties are well connected and in cooperation.

Although the WUT has an anonymous student evaluation system, the results from it have rarely been used for decisions or quality development and generally the teachers are not even informed about the outcome but can see them on request only. The students are never told about the outcomes of their evaluations and this can seriously undermine any trust the students might have in the usefulness of this exercise. It must be stressed that this is not simply a matter of getting data. There must be **proper transparency and feedback to the students about course improvement and the follow-up. The Team draws attention to the Student Survey of April 2009 which gave rise to a number of problems. The Team recommends the University respond to the issues raised in the Survey.**

5. Strategic management and capacity for change: How does the institution change in order to improve?

The WUT faces a number of challenges in the area of strategic management and capacity for change. The students have been active in addressing their needs and participating in the governance of the institution, and this is a hopeful sign in the capacity to change. Governmental control is a serious constraint on the human resources development in the institution. One of the positive strategic initiatives of the WUT is the invitation of the IEP Team and the creation of the Department for Quality Assurance.

Before making any recommendations for change, it is important to identify constraints in achieving the objectives of any development or strategic plan.

The main external and internal constraints of WUT as the Team sees them, could be identified as follows:

- Massification of education
- Heavy governmental control of University expenditure
- Budgetary problems
- Misunderstanding of the Bologna process
- Low flexibility of study programmes and lack of interdisciplinary cooperation
- Lack of a strategic management culture
- Low financial support of research

The answer is a reform of many the University activities. Fortunately, Rector Prof. Talpoş had the courage to initiate an ambitious revival process of the University in difficult times. The **implementation of change** is often the most difficult part of the process within any type of institution. It is definitively easier when change is accepted by the members of that institution as an on-going process.

Therefore the importance of effective **internal communication** at the University cannot be overemphasised. Change cannot just be imposed from above, although sufficient control must be maintained so as to guide the process. This requires **good two-way communication**, thorough consultation with and feedback to all partners, and clear reporting on achievements. In other words: **trusted, clear, frank and transparent generally accepted and agreed processes and rules must operate**. This will avoid, or at least significantly minimise, the disillusionment which could emerge from very fast changes and inadequate communication.

Over the last years, the West University of Timișoara, has proved that it can adapt to new challenges in the fields of teaching, learning and research.

The IEP Team congratulates **the University on its students**. The Team met dozens of students and all of them have been very proud of their University. Some of them stressed that they choose this University because of its **recognised high quality**. From this point of view the review Team believes that the University has a good future.

Based on what the Team has seen during the review process, it is confident that the University could successfully meet the challenges it is now facing in a constantly changing environment. The Team feels that it is moving in the right direction and hopes that this progress will continue and intensify.

6. Conclusions

The Team commends WUT on the initiative to evaluate its capacity for change and to invite the IEP Team to review its activities. The Team identified a number of strengths and weaknesses of the WUT and offers a number of recommendations for the WUT's future growth and improvement.

6.1 Strengths

The Team found it commendable that the quality assurance system is already developing at the WUT. The Team is pleased to say that it has seen the beginning of this process by creating the Department of Quality Management and by undergoing an IEP institutional evaluation and an ARACIS institutional evaluation. The WUT has proved that it adapts to new challenges in teaching and research. It has adopted the three-tier degree system, introduced ECTS, established international agreements to foster mobility and seeks connections with employers as witnessed through the study programmes with inbuilt practical training components. The WUT has a good starting position to face the future demographic challenges through its Department of Life Long Learning and Open Distance Learning. Further, some faculties have already established partnerships and participate in the international research projects and networks.

The students at WUT as well as the Alumni are proud of this University, appreciate its quality and are willing to contribute to its development. Students are represented in all governing bodies at different levels of the WUT as stipulated by the national regulation. This is a brilliant opportunity for the WUT to harness this potential. The Team commends the University leadership's initiative in establishing an Alumni centre and developing a closer network with former students and potential employers.

6.2 Weaknesses

Despite the change in the HE funding mechanism in Romania towards lump sum budget allocation, governmental control seems to be a serious constraint when it comes to University expenditure and staffing. The disparity between the University autonomy to earn its funding and its autonomy to spend it in the way that best serves the university, points to the need to decrease governmental control.

The WUT Strategy and the Rector's managerial plan lack a detailed financial plan which must be the inseparable part of the Strategic development plan. The long list of goals may be difficult to achieve. The Team can fully agree with the SER outcomes that with existing resources not even part of the goals can be implemented.

The Team had an impression that the students are, while formally representing their rights in the WUT governing bodies, not necessarily communicating their concerns and issues to the broader student community. Students also expressed concerns about the lack of information about possibilities for mobility, possible sources of funding and about their representation and course evaluation outcomes.

The Team observed a limited amount of inter-faculty cooperation with reduced possibilities for students to take free elective courses.

The IEP Team's evaluation indicates that a good number of staff has difficulties in accepting and implementing the Bologna process and needs further assistance. In the view of the Team teaching loads are too high.

The overall mobility of students and staff remains rather low despite the reforms already undertaken at WUT with regard to facilitating mobility.

6.3 Recommendations

1. The Team recommends the University amend the mission statement and develop a separate vision of the University which will also reflect its policy concerning the adoption of the Bologna process and to prepare the mission statements of individual faculties and institutes, which, while reflecting the specific character of individual subunits, will be consistent with the general mission of the University considering Romania's new international situation of Romania as a new member of the EU.

2. The Team recommends that a University-wide discussion should start and agreement should be reached on a few basic carefully chosen priorities and attainable goals. A detailed and realistic financial plan with concrete sums allocated to each project should be approved. Similarly the faculties should elaborate their own individual strategic plans in concert with the University one.

3. The Team encourages the University to have a strong participation of active students in the University decision-making bodies and decision-making processes at all levels, if possible with voting rights. In order to achieve this, the student participation culture should be enhanced across the WUT. The role of students in the University governance is, according to the Team, consistent with the aims of the Bologna process: students and staff should act as full partners in the HE governance.

4. The IEP Team recommends enhancing international exchanges by eliminating the possible barriers to mobility, such as the low programme flexibility or lack of information to potentially mobile students on the part of the University. The University should ensure the transferability of the ECTS from abroad so that students would not need to take additional examinations upon their return.

5. The Team strongly recommends the University leadership define as one of its very high priorities the strengthening of student exchanges through international programmes such as ERASMUS and **provide WUT students in all faculties with the necessary information** via the Department of International Relations.

6. The Team recommends that the University undertake a detailed review of staff workloads and in some specialisations lower the number of teaching contact hours to an acceptable value.

7. The Team recommends WUT increase its focus on learning. Therefore, WUT should very carefully analyse the learning outcomes. This will also allow the reduction of contact hours which can, but don't always have to, be the best mode for the learner.
8. The Team recommends the permeation of faculty boundaries so that more exchange and cross-fertilisation between the faculties could take place which would enhance the programme offerings as well as increasing the attractiveness of the programmes. The Team advises WUT to increase cross-faculty cooperation initiatives, such as joint study or research programmes.
9. The WUT distance education and life-long learning policy could and should play a key role in developing a lifelong learning culture at WUT and in the region.
10. The Team encourages the University to monitor and analyse labour market trends especially when it comes to present and future demand for its graduates.
11. Stakeholder presence should be enhanced both at the curriculum development level in different faculties and in the governance of the institution, and the University should strengthen its connections with the local community and regional business and industry.
12. The Team considers it to be especially necessary for the WUT to have a University-wide research policy paper. The research objectives should be included in the University Strategic plan and should define the research areas in which efforts should be concentrated. Such a University policy should indicate clear sustainable priorities concerning the development of research at WUT. The policy and priorities should also show how the research is related to the educational process. The Team also considers that the development of these priorities should be based on the University's own criteria and needs.
13. The WUT research strategy should also foster the collaboration between different departments to attempt to generate critical mass in research and if possible the targeted recruitment of new research staff in identified prioritised areas.
14. Performance-based rewarding (and the Team would like to stress that this should not only relate to research) should be implemented across the University.
15. The Team recommends that the University should take a more active role in acquiring research funds from abroad. The Team recommends the WUT develop a comprehensive plan supporting the increase of the research income from external international and national contracts. The Team recommends the leadership of the WUT maintain an effective Department of International Relations.
16. To support research activities at the University the Team recommends the introduction of a scheme of seed money for research at WUT and recommends the University introduce its own research support scheme especially for young researchers; it should also establish an internal research grant system and do more to facilitate conference attendance

17. The Team recommends the University start a country-wide campaign to address the whole population and companies and contact University alumni to promote the University and establish closer contacts with employers and potential donors.

18. The Team recommends the WUT leadership adopt the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” and to do its best to achieve the correct balance between external and internal quality assurance.

19. The Team strongly recommends that WUT institutionalise quality assurance by appointing a Vice-Rector specifically responsible for quality assurance within the university.

20. Building the capacity and expertise of the DQM through training and through the provision of substantial financial and human resources such as internships would be beneficial to the whole University. Introducing the quality assurance system in the University at all levels and training the faculty staff responsible for quality assurance would help the University to monitor itself and to improve.

21. The Team strongly supports the Department of Quality Management and recommends that their activities should be an important objective of the University strategic plan. The Team recommends the design and implementation of an ongoing quality assurance and quality enhancement system, primarily for the areas of teaching, research and University administration.

22. The Team recommends the University respond to the issues raised in the Student Survey of April 2009 since there must be proper transparency and feedback to the students about course improvement and the follow-up.

23. The Team strongly recommends the establishment of an effective internal communication at the University. WUT should review the effectiveness of the means by which it communicates with students. Change cannot just be imposed from above, although sufficient control must be maintained so as to guide the process. This requires good two-way communication, thorough consultation with and feedback to all partners, and clear reporting on achievements.

24. The Team advises that the final written IEP evaluation report be translated into Romanian and made accessible to the broader University community. It is imperative to enhance the availability and the awareness of the University’s institutional quality.

The West University of Timișoara is a university which has a good spirit and is making a real and dynamic contribution to the life and future of the city and region of which it is a part. Maintaining and developing such a position is in itself a challenge, but this challenge is even greater given the transition environment in which WUT is operating.

The IEP Team would like to compliment the leaders, staff and students of WUT for their awareness of democratisation and reforms issues at their university and the determination with which these are pursued. It is our hope that this review process will help further develop this awareness and be of use in overcoming some of the constraints identified.

Over recent years, the WUT has proved that it can adapt to new challenges in the fields of teaching, learning and research. Based on what it saw during the review process, the Team is confident that WUT will successfully meet the challenges it is now facing in a constantly changing environment. The Team hopes that some of the comments may be of use in this process, and wish the University continued success in fulfilling its mission.

References

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