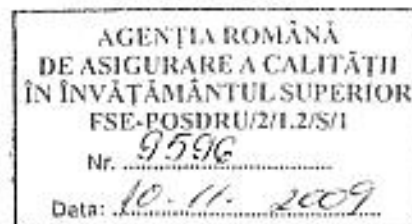EXTERNAL EVALUATOR'S REPORT
FOR ARACIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL, SCIENCES AND VETERINARY
MEDICINE, CLUJ, NOVEMBER 2009

Contents

Introduction

I was appointed as a Foreign External Evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and was consequently invited to join the evaluation team for the institutional re-accreditation process of University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj Napoca (USAMV Cluj) from the 03 to 06 November 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the external evaluator's view of USAMV Cluj is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Overall, it was found that the University's institutional approach to quality enhancement was informed by clear strategic direction and was leading to systematic improvements in learning opportunities. In the last two years the University has conducted a number of major initiatives to enhance the support for all its students and its staff in the areas of learning, teaching and research.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University has invested significantly in strengthening the support for its postgraduate students. Overall, it was found that the arrangements for postgraduate research students were appropriate and satisfactory and met the precepts of the Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.

Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The external auditor identified the following areas of good practice:

- the University's planned, systematic and reflective approach to the review of its processes and structures
- the peer-assisted learning scheme, in its development opportunities for student mentors and in the additional support it provides for first-year students
- the peripatetic roles for liaison, advice and support, which serves not only to disseminate information but also to enhance the student experience wherever delivered
- the fully integrated support mechanisms for research students operating across all areas of the University.

Recommendations for action

The external auditor recommends that the USAMV Cluj consider further action in some areas, as follows:

- to maintain appropriate oversight of the standards of awards and the quality of the student experience in individual programme
- to ensure a robust quality assurance scheme for its future collaborative programme with Viterbe region and Viterbe University (Italy).

Recommendations for action that the audit considers desirable:

- to ensure that the development of annual monitoring fulfils its potential with respect to the enhancement of student learning opportunities across the University.

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The University traces its origins to 1869 with the foundation of the Institutul de Invatamant Agronomic Cluj-Manastiur. Its more recent history flows from the formation of the Institutul Agronomic Cluj in 1948. This was redesignated as Universitatea de Stiinte Agricole Cluj-Napoca in 1991 and as University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in 1995. The University is located on one campus within the Manastiur conurbation. At the time of the audit, the University had approximately 7000 students, of which 700 postgraduate students.

2   The academic provision of the University is largely based in its four Faculties: the Agricultural Faculty, the Horticultural Faculty, the Zootechnical and Biotechnology and the Veterinary Medicine Faculty. The University offers a wide range of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes in these subject areas, together with awards for postgraduate research.

3   The University, as set out in Raportul Anual al Rectorului Universitatii de Stiinte Agricole si Medicina Veterinara din Cluj-Napoca 2008, envisages the ongoing development of the University to be a strongly internationally oriented institution, characterised by a student-centred environment that emphasises both intellectual achievement and employability and offering a range of high-quality academic programmes geared to the professions.

4   The Briefing Paper drew attention to the presentation in the Report of a strategy that includes the development of the academic staff profile to strengthen the research, enterprise and professional practice dimensions of the University's achievement. This has involved a range of initiatives investing in the potential of existing staff through substantial development programmes, and a major PhD scholarship programme.

The information base for the audit

5   The University provided the international expert with supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The expert had access to all documents in hard copy; in addition the expert had access to the University's intranet and its student and staff portals.

6   The Students' Association produced a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

7   In addition, the external evaluator had access to:

• the report of Internal Institutional Evaluation for USAMV Cluj 2009

• the report on Research and Development at USAMV Cluj 2008

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8   Overall authority for the management of academic standards and quality lies with the University's Senate. It is served by the Academic Standards Committee (ASC), which has the remit for the development of quality processes and the monitoring of their effectiveness. Processes are generally developed, introduced and monitored centrally, but implemented at school level (this now including the management of academic standards and quality for all collaborative provision), with faculties academic boards and faculty quality assurance and enhancement committees having responsibility for oversight at programme level. The central quality-related committees and the faculties are supported by the Office for Academic Development and Quality, which also provides policy development and administrative resources for the University's quality system.

9   The University has a comprehensive quality assurance framework (QAF). The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group provides independent members for internal and external evaluation panels, Boards of examiners, academic offences panels and internal audits. It includes all members of Senate and ASC, together with nominated members with recognised experience in this area. The University has recently undertaken a multisided quality assurance internal institutional evaluation, which reported in September 2009.

10   The University Academic Policies and Regulations and the associated Academic Procedures have also been recently reviewed. The latter provide guidance on the operation of all processes connected with the management of academic standards and quality, and are designed to ensure a uniformity of approach at school level. They cover, among other things, approval, monitoring and review procedures, modification processes, standard assessment regulations, monitoring of progression and completion rates, the independent marking process, engagement with key external reference points and the use of external examiners.

11   The external evaluator looked at the relationship between University processes and their iteration and implementation at faculty level and found that there was clear evidence that an integrated approach was being developed, which provided opportunities for the dissemination of information from programmes, through faculties, to University level.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

12   In its Briefing Paper, the University explained that its quality assurance framework (QAF) for ensuring that academic standards are secured consists of: its procedures for approval, monitoring and review, which include the involvement of external personnel; its assessment policies and regulations; the monitoring of progression and completion rates; its engagement with external reference points; and the use of external examiners. A wide-ranging review of this framework was conducted in 2009. The Internal Institutional Evaluation report found the framework to be fit for purpose and recommended a number of modifications. These were discussed in detail at a series of Academic Standards Committee (ASC) meetings, and agreed changes were then incorporated in the Academic Policies and Regulations and Academic Procedures. An updated action plan tracked the progress of other recommendations in the evaluation report.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

13   The University's Academic Procedures state that the process of evaluation for the approval or periodic review of programme frameworks has three stages: the planning phase during which proposals for new or revised framework developments are approved by the Faculty Academic

Board and ASC with the resources required for any new provision being signed off by the relevant dean; the design phase, which is the responsibility of the faculty and will consider curriculum, resources and transitional arrangements for students; and an evaluation phase which is conducted by a panel appointed by the Office of Academic Development and Quality (ADQ). For this last phase, a panel is appointed comprising one or more internal members independent of the proposing faculty, and one or more external panel members independent of the University.

14   The audit trails enabled the external evaluator to examine the approval process for an undergraduate framework and a postgraduate framework. The detailed documentation confirmed that the process was thorough and conformed with the Academic Procedures. The initial briefing papers explained the framework rationale, and included evidence of consultation with external examiners and employers. The design phase was found to give detailed consideration to a wide range of issues including resources, student experience and employability, alignment with University Quality Assurance, and learning and teaching strategy. The documents submitted included external examiner reports, annual reports on programme monitoring, design and briefing papers, and framework specifications. The panel's conditions and recommendations led to dialogue between the framework teams and external panel members, with final approval being given only when the panel had signed-off the team's response.

15   The Academic Procedures give details of the process for the annual report on programme monitoring (ARPM). This consists of an action plan and short programme leader's report, supported by an electronic folder of all relevant monitoring data and including the reports of, and responses to, external examiners. The ARPM is checked by a school reader, who reports to the Faculty Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (FQAEC) on whether the monitoring data is complete and is accurately reflected in the ARPM. FQAEC then considers the strengths and weaknesses of the action plan and report, and agrees appropriate actions. The faculty reports the outcomes of monitoring to ASC through a faculty quality report (FQR) summarising achievements, strategies for solving problems and identifying issues which lie outside the school. The Briefing Paper described the FQRs as a comprehensive mechanism by which ASC can be satisfied that schools are carrying our their responsibilities for the management of academic standards which enables FQAECs to supply a timely synopsis of the outcomes of framework monitoring so as to inform the annual revision of the University's Educational Enhancement Strategy.

16   The monitoring process for this framework was examined as part of the audit trails. The ARPMs provided a detailed and reflective commentary on a range of monitoring data, covering learning, assessment and resources, work-based learning, student progression and achievement, programme meeting minutes, programme leaders' reports and feedback from students, employers and external examiners. The action plans succinctly identified issues to be addressed and the proposed actions; the source of the issue (such as an external examiner's report); the deadline for action; the person responsible for action and the progress to date. The plans also noted progress against previous plans. The Briefing Paper stated that the ARPM process will be further streamlined so that framework teams can maintain a 'live action plan' update during the year. Action plans will be discussed with student representatives and more accessible data from the University's management information system.

17   The faculties' management of the ARPM process is subject to a periodic desk-based audit. The University cited the example of the Veterinary Faculty audit, which was recently audited under the EUA scheme at European level. The internal audit panel was appointed by ASC and comprised two academic members of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (QAEG) and two members of ADQ. It audited five framework ARPMs and while reporting general confidence in the monitoring and commending particular features, it made recommendations for actions at faculty level; it also recommended that the University ensure that best practice in completing unit monitoring reports is followed and good practice in ARPM drafting is recorded. An annual summative report on audits serves to identify common themes and is submitted to ASC; this has resulted in improvements, for example to the format of faculty readers' reports. The QAF review recommended that the current audit process be replaced with a broader periodic audit

considering all school quality assurance procedures including monitoring the operation of FQAECs, programme development and assessment processes. The team concluded that the annual monitoring process was thorough and effective, and that its impact was likely to be enhanced both by the new FQR process and the introduction of internal audits with a wider remit.

External examiners

18   The University stated that considerable emphasis is placed on the input of external examiners in the management and maintenance of its academic standards. The criteria for appointment are detailed in the Academic Policies and Regulations, and guidance to examiners is provided in the Academic Procedures. External examiner nominations are reviewed by QAEG members and appointments are approved by ASC. Faculties nominate candidates and, to reflect the University's strategy of enhancing the academic standing of programmes, Faculties have been encouraged to place more emphasis on a research profile when making nominations. The evidence suggested that this was the case. The Academic Procedures provide that new external examiners will be briefed on their role and responsibilities by ADQ, Faculties and the chairs of boards of examiners.

19   The Academic Procedures provide that every programme leading to an award of the University must have one external examiner and that where there are a team of externals for one or more programmes, a chief external examiner may be appointed. It is expected that external examiners will approve both examination papers and the design of course work assessments. They will review a range of marked assessed work and are required to participate in all boards of examiners meetings at which decisions on awards are made. They are entitled to make recommendations for the moderation of marks that must be taken into account by boards. Their decision on a matter of principle must be accepted by the board, subject to a reference to Senate. The audit trails provided evidence that external examiners did approve examination papers and also coursework where this constituted 100 per cent of the unit assessment, and that they were satisfied with the conduct and decision of the examination boards.

20   External examiners are invited to give an oral report at the board of examiners meeting and are required to submit a written report on a standard electronic form to ADQ, preferably within two weeks of the meeting. The form requires comments on standards, assessment and the performance of the programme and asks examiners to consider a number of issues under each heading including student performance in relation to the FHEQ and subject benchmarks. An examination of the reports in the audit trails showed that external examiners reported at length under each of the headings, focusing in particular on the performance of the students. While there were some critical comments, the balance of these reports was positive and the report summaries confirmed that the standards set for the awards were appropriate and the standards of student performance was comparable with that in other HEIs.

21   Once completed, reports are considered by framework/programme teams, who are expected to provide a response. Whilst the University's monitoring systems provided substantial evidence of such responses, the University had noted that some programme teams had not responded, and in such cases the deputy deans (education) had been asked to follow up, drawing attention to the programme leader's responsibility for responding. The external examiner report and the response to it together form part of the ARPM. This report is scrutinised by the FQAEC and feed into the FQR reported to ASC. External examiners are invited to submit an overview report at the end of their term and may also report to the Rector at any time on matters of serious concern but the team were told that neither form of report had been made in recent years.

22   The External Examining Review Group (EERG) conducts an annual analysis of external examiner reports which is then reported to ASC. The external examiner considers that the University has in place an effective process for taking action, should any threats to standards be identified by external examiners.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

23   The Academic Quality Assurance and relevant QAA subject benchmark statements are explicitly considered in the design of provision. At the evaluation stage of approval external panel members are asked to focus on the FHEQ and benchmarks and the audit team noted that reports that it scrutinised made clear reference to both. External examiners are asked to consider student performance in relation to the Academic Quality and benchmarks and there was evidence to demonstrate this was taking place. The University stated that alignment with all the sections of the Code of practice had been progressively considered through ASC and that the Code had prompted new initiatives.

24   All programme teams are encouraged to consider possible professional body accreditation and that while ADQ holds a central record of accreditations, faculties generally act as the key point of contact with the PSRB and depending upon its requirements, may agree a joint approval and review process. The audit team was told that faculties report to ASC on PSRB engagement through the FQR. As the FQRs examined by the team concerned frameworks with no PSRB engagement, the team was not able to confirm this. The external examiner saw evidence that the University had engaged constructively with the European dimension and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) framework. Accordingly it has issued a guidance note in relation to international student exchange, and amended the Academic Procedures section on International Mobility programmes. The University provides graduates Diploma Supplements, including reference to ECTS credits.

Assessment policies and regulations

25   The University's independent marking protocol is set out in its Academic Policies and Regulations. The protocol outlines the principles governing double-marking, single-marking and moderation. Following the comments of some external examiners as to the lack of evidence of moderation or second-marking and the report from the QAF review assessment working group, the QAF review proposed a revised procedure which clarified the faculty-level responsibility for signing off a framework and marking plan. This identifies the number and nature of assessments for each unit, timescales for submission and arrangements for independent marking. Faculties have protocols covering the assessment of group work and, where applicable, provide students with detailed information about the assessment of work placements.

26   From the documentary evidence of the QAF review deliberations and the ASC discussions, together with the reports from staff and students, the international expert concluded that the University had appropriate procedures and evaluative arrangements in place for the framing and implementation of its assessment policies and regulations.

Management information - statistics

27   The University considered that the scrutiny in faculties of progression and attainment data along with the results of the NSS and the student unit evaluation allows programme teams to consider relevant issues as part of the programme monitoring process. Staff confirmed that degree standards were monitored in the light of the statistical data and that staff reflected on such data in relation to the units with which they were involved. The QAF review working group on management information reported that the extensive data available to programme teams were adequate but recommended that it be made more readily available to enable teams to track year-on-year developments. It had also recommended that EEC should produce an annual data analysis report for senior management, faculties and professional services. On the basis of the evidence seen, the external examiner was satisfied that the University was making effective use of a range of statistical information in managing academic standards and that it was actively seeking to enhance the use of the data related to educational performance.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28   In considering the University's management of learning opportunities, the external examiner examined the role of engagement with employers, in particular through a work-placement programme; the links between research and learning opportunities; the engagement
with students through formal processes; the use of feedback and performance data; and the role of the monitoring and review in relation to these areas. As already noted, in all of these areas, and in their incorporation into the design and approval of programmes, the University makes systematic reference, wherever relevant, to the Code of practice, published by QAA.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

29   The University had recently been involved in substantial approval and review activity in order to address the introduction of the new curriculum architecture based on programme frameworks. This is a key aspect of the University's 2008 Educational Enhancement Strategy (EES), in which the emphasis is on enhancing the quality of the student experience based on research excellence and the sharing of expertise between faculties. The curricular design process was supported by a learning technology theme which identifies the virtual learning environment (e-learning), as a core element integrating education, employability and international capability into the student experience.
The framework reviews examined by the external examiner expressly considered curricular design including the use of placements, learning and teaching, resources and quality enhancement. They resulted in conditions and recommendations under a number of those headings.

30   The Academic Procedures state that annual reports on programme monitoring (ARPMs) are the primary mechanism by which faculties assure the quality of their programmes, through which the University monitors that quality. The ARPMs witnessed by the external examiner required comment on issues relating to the quality of learning opportunities such as placements, study support, assessment strategy, resources and the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE).

Management information - feedback from students

31   The University utilises its own student unit evaluations (SUE). Faculties report back to the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) on responses at Faculty and university level. At University level, it was set a target for improvement, progression rates, graduate employability. Feedback-related evaluative reports from 2008, showed that a wide range of issues related to the quality of learning opportunities had been considered, with communication, curriculum organisation and feedback to students being common themes across faculties.

32   Programme team meetings have student feedback as a standard agenda item and these meetings, which include students, provide an effective form of feedback to programme teams with the minutes being an important element of the data considered in the ARPM process.

33   The external examiner formed the view that the University was taking a comprehensive and thorough approach to student feedback, with evaluative review systems in place which could identify areas for improvement, as necessary. Overall, its arrangements for the management and consideration of student feedback were effective at University, committee and programme levels.

Role of students in quality assurance

34   The University has established procedures to ensure that students participate in policy and decision making procedures. Students sit on a range of university-level committees including Senate, ASC, partnership boards and the Student Experience Committee (SEC). Students are made aware of all levels of representation through intranet and through the work of Students' Association officers.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

35   The University's Strategic Plan 2008-2012 contains several references to supporting a transition in which academic staff were supported to progress further their career. Human resource and staff development strategic plans also refer to staff development opportunities designed to increase staff research and scholarly activity. To support this strategic direction, the University's change management process has focused extensively on a 'Releasing Potential' agenda. The various strands of this initiative combine personal research development with the development of student learning opportunities, resulting in explicit links between research and student learning. In addition, the Academic Staff Development Department (ASDD) is responsible for the development of pedagogical practice and research. The research-related aspects of the strategy are discussed in more detail below.

36   Professors, deans and deputy deans (education) have responsibility for overseeing the development of the curricula and its relationship with research.

Other modes of study

37   The University provides a wide spectrum of learning opportunities for its students. This includes an appropriate mix of academic and non-academic experiences and relevant extra-curricular activities. Learning is supported by well integrated online resources, allowing both pure distance learning and the incorporation of e-learning into the broader curriculum. In meetings with the audit team, University representatives emphasised this commitment to a range of student learning opportunities and acknowledged that some are more established than others. The majority of undergraduate programmes feature work-placements. The learning experience from the placement feeds into subsequent modules in the final year of study. Guidelines are provided for staff and students through programme handbooks, together with support by placement development advisers. While the support arrangements for placements are managed at school level, the overall process is monitored at programme, school and university levels.

38   The external examiner's view is that the University's arrangements for study programmes are effective.

Resources for learning

39   The Strategic Plan 2008-2012 took note of the benchmarked position of the University with regard to investment in estate and to information and communication technology (ICT); this placed the University at the upper end of the sector. A permanent evaluation of need by each faculty, department resulted in subsequent investment in library and ICT facilities. E-journals and e-books are provided for all students. Librarians liaise with academic staff through school-based mechanisms to ensure that student needs are addressed.

40   All students have full access to the University's virtual learning environment, which has been developed in consultation with staff and students. All lecture notes are placed on the electronic format, alongside access to support material and guidance. Students are inducted to the e-learning through faculty-based staff.

Admissions policy

41   The University's admissions regulations are published in its Academic Policies and Regulations. The procedures have been revised in light of recommendations from the 2005 review of processes set against the Code of practice. To support the process, a series of workshops are held annually for academic and support staff. The audit team noted that a number of improvements were in progress with schools being advised and supported in taking greater responsibility for the quality of admission

procedures. Students particularly welcomed the approach taken by the University regarding clarity of information and support prior to registration. The external examiner is of the view that the University operates a sound admissions policy in a consistent manner.

Student support

42   The University's Strategic Plan states that education is its top priority. The University regards itself as a student-centred institution, and as such has invested significantly in academic and pastoral support for all students. Recent developments in this area included central guidance on admissions, revised guidance on programme handbooks, student handbook; providing access to advice on financial, facilities and services matters.

43   Student entitlement is communicated to staff and students in the student handbook and through programme handbooks. Academic staff are provided with training on student expectations during induction and staff development sessions provided by Human Resources. Study support is delivered through a range of academic services about which information is accessible throughout intranet. Students may self-refer or be advised to attend support sessions. International students are supported from induction to completion by the faculties and the International Support Team.

Staff support (including staff development)

44   The Strategic Plan highlighted the need to invest in research staff in order to achieve the University's vision. The external evaluator observed that a range of central policies and staff development programme level initiatives reflected this investment. Thus recruitment and induction procedures have been established which are subject to review within the context of the human resource policy and annual reporting.

45   Promotion is based on achievements across an identified range of performance in education, research, enterprise and professional practice. Faculties are responsible for peer observation and annual appraisals, and both of these are being strengthened and put on a more systematic basis.

46   New staff are required by the University to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Education Practice, and completion of part of this is linked to probation.

47   The University has supported staff in pedagogic innovation, for instance developing online learning through the intranet e-learning platform.

48   The external evaluator considered the University's arrangements for staff support and development in relation to academic staff engaged in teaching and the supervision of research students to be effective.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

49   In its Briefing Paper, the University presented a picture of a gradual movement towards an enhancement-led approach to the quality of student learning opportunities. The University considers that this development is founded upon a growing self-confidence and is dependent on a number of other aspects, the use of management information being a key element. It also considers that a confidence in the security of academic standards has led to greater concentration on the enhancement of learning opportunities.

50   The Strategic Plan is focused on creating an environment and ethos which encourage enhancement of student learning opportunities. This clearly defined commitment to self-review and change,

51   Alongside these developments, the University indicated that the position of the Academic Pro-rector was of central importance to the oversight and coordination of enhancement, and identified this as a developing role within the University. The Pro-rector 'takes a panoramic view of the experience from application to employment that includes issues of accommodation, the students' experience as learners, pastoral support such as counselling, the social context of studying at Cluj and employability'.

Management information - quality enhancement

52   Through the audit sampling trails, it was apparent to the external evaluator that the University was developing strong processes which facilitated the gathering of information and the effective upward reporting of local programme matters through to school, and University, level. School quality reports (SQRs) offered a good opportunity both to focus on enhancement and to identify issues that were important to the more general University community. It was less apparent, however, both from the sampling trails and from discussion with staff across the University that processes were firmly established which allowed for the dissemination of action as a result of reporting, back to programme level, though this may emerge once a full cycle of activity has taken place under the new Academic Procedures.

53   The University uses Student Feedback Forms as key points of reference for the management of quality and standards.

Good practice

54   Within the committee structure, the University's Education Enhancement Committee and faculty quality assurance and enhancement committees operate to capture good practice, through annual monitoring and periodic review processes, and to disseminate this across the University.

55   In meetings with staff from across the University the external evaluator heard that, in addition to the role of Academic Pro-rector, the deans played a valuable part in capturing and disseminating good practice, both through day-to-day activity and through the operation of University processes.

Staff development and reward

56   In recent years, the University has invested much time and effort in supporting staff in developing their professional practice and research potential. All staff who are new to higher education are required to participate in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education Practice. There is also a peer observation of teaching scheme that operates at faculty level.

57   During the visit, the external evaluator heard much from staff of the investment, which they felt the University was making in developing a full academic culture within all faculties.

58   In all, the external evaluator was shown a developing picture of enhancement activity across the University, with many examples of positive practice. As structures become more firmly embedded (particularly the relationship between Academic Standards and Education Enhancement Committees) there will undoubtedly be opportunities for these practices to become more firmly embedded across the University. While at this early stage, the University will benefit from maintaining a careful overview of process, to ensure that every opportunity is taken to establish a strategic approach to enhancement at an institutional level.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

59   USAMV Cluj has started a collaborative portfolio with Viterbo region and University (Italy) with the

intention to have a first academic year run in 2010. The University's Strategic Plan 2008-2012 emphasises the ongoing importance of collaborative working with partners.

60 From 2010-11, collaborative provision is a standing agenda item for faculty academic boards and school quality assurance and enhancement committees.

61 In discussions with the external examiner, the University recognised that there was some more work to be done regarding this partnership management and quality assurance provision.

Partnership and programme approval

62 All prospective partnership programmes must undergo a ARACIS approval procedure. This involves two stages; development and institutional approval. The development stage incorporates a risk assessment conducted by the University and the preparation of a development proposal. This proposal is submitted to ARACIS. If approved, a memorandum of understanding is signed and the approval events are planned. Programme approval may run alongside institutional approval if agreed by ARACIS. The institutional approval stage includes appropriate 'due diligence' investigations. The approval of individual programmes at the partner institution then follows. New programmes at a new partner institution are only approved, in the first instance, for five years.

Publicity

63 Publicity for programmes at partner institutions is governed by the University protocols, either the publicity protocol (RO) or the publicity protocol (international). The University produces two student handbooks, one for students studying at partner institutions and one for students studying at the main University campuses.

64 The external evaluator found that the University is an incipient phase on developing its management of collaborative provision. Particular improvements are necessary in arrangements for reporting, and for the communication and support of its partner.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

65 The University offers programmes of supervised study, leading to the degrees of Master and Doctor of Philosophy (by thesis). The responsibility for the quality and standards of research degrees has been delegated, by Senate, to Postgraduate School, chaired by a Director.

The research environment

66 During the audit briefing visit, the external examiner learned of the University's determination to embrace research and scholarship at all levels. This determination has concentrated upon staff development and engagement with research together with a 'substantial PhD Studentship scheme' within which over 196 fully-funded studentships have been made available in the 2009 academic year.

67 The University has also established 12 research centres across its 4 faculties. Postgraduate research students who met with the external evaluator affirmed that these centres provided a useful locus of additional research support for them, over and above their direct supervisory teams. In some faculties, research centre meetings offered opportunities for research students to present their work in progress to colleagues and receive valuable feedback.

Selection, admission and induction of students

68   The University retains an open application policy for postgraduate research students who are invited to make proposals to any of the 4 faculties, via the Post-Graduate school. In discussion with postgraduate research students the external evaluator learned that in addition to this open application route, the University also offered competitive research scholarships in some areas where research projects grants are part of the funding offer.

69   The University has a central goal to broaden the engagement of academic staff with research and enterprise activity. Current information on the University's portal show there to be approximately 400 students currently registered for research degrees at the University.

70 All postgraduate research students receive, each year in hard copy, the University's Code of Practice for Research Degrees, which augments and clarifies both the regulations for the award of research degrees and the processes around induction, progression and examination. This is also available to students electronically, via the University's website. Also a number of other documents such as Research Methods and Methodology for Production of PhD thesis are available to the post-graduate students. Students met by the external evaluator confirmed that this was the most important source of published information and guidance for them. Admission criteria for each level of research award are outlined in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees.

Supervision

71   The University' supervisory teams for postgraduate research students is made of reputable professors. Teams must 'contain an active researcher with expertise in the relevant subject or discipline area, one of whom must have successfully supervised one or more PGR to completion'. No supervisor may supervise more than 15 postgraduate research students at any one time.

72   Students met by the external evaluator were unanimously appreciative of the dedication and expertise of their supervisory teams. The team found that the postgraduate research portal, although still in early stages of development, provided an important support to supervisory activities.

73   Having reviewed both the current and planned range of information that it offered, the external evaluator considered that it will enable the University to retain central oversight of the experience of supervision and the progression of research students in all its faculties.

Progress and review arrangements

74   After admission onto a research programme, postgraduate research students are expected to present scientific referate. Students met by the audit team affirmed that these processes afforded them useful opportunities for reflection and were taken very seriously within the University.

75   The Post-Graduate School monitors progression of all postgraduate research students within the University. The public defence of thesis by candidates examination includes appropriately qualified academic staff.

Development of research and other skills

76   Induction is through a mandatory induction programme. All postgraduate research students complete regular training needs analyses and the outcomes of these are recorded in the 'student log document'. These data are used to 'inform Post-Graduate School support for PGRs'. Progress and review arrangements are stipulated in the contract that is produced with the offer for a place to read for a PhD. Research students, met during the audit visit, confirmed that both the generic support available to them, and the support that could be arranged to cater for more specific research-related requirement, were appropriate to their needs. All postgraduate research students who undertake teaching duties within the University are required to complete a pedagogical course provided. Students met by the team who fulfilled teaching roles confirmed that they had participated in the programme.

Feedback mechanisms

77 The Postgraduate code of practice stated that postgraduate research students 'have a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to provide feedback to the University on their experience'.

78 Postgraduate research students, met by the external evaluator, confirmed that Students' Association support was available to them. All students reflected that they were very much involved as staff members within their individual faculties, being invited to staff meetings and given opportunities to feed back on their experience in this way.

Assessment

79 Assessment policies for research degrees are outlined in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees. Prior to submission of their final thesis, postgraduate research students will normally have gone through an upgrade process, presentation of scientific referate to relevant subject departments. Submission of the final thesis and arrangements for public defend is stipulated in the contract signed. Arrangements for examination, including the appointment of appropriate examiners, is stipulated in the contract signed between the student and University when the offer of a place was formally made.

Complaints and appeals

80 The University's Code of Practice for Research Degrees includes full details of procedures relating to complaints, appeals and academic misconduct and students who met the audit team were confident that they would know how to operate the processes. Students referred to the 'open door' policy operating within the Podst-Graduate School, which was seen as a useful supplement to supervisory and school support mechanisms. Postgraduate research students were also unanimous in their appreciation of the work of postgraduate research administrators within the six schools, identifying them frequently as an invaluable source of advice and guidance.

Summary

81 The external evaluator recognised that the University had put much effort into ensuring that there was a fully-integrated support mechanism for its research students, working across supervisory teams, the four faculties and the Post-Graduate School, and that this provided an excellent experience for these researchers. The developing use of a web portal for postgraduate researchers, is a significant initiative. When fully embedded this will allow for a proactive engagement with postgraduate student experience across all schools, and support its monitoring at university level.

82 In 2008-09, around 25 per cent of the academic staff were engaged in the process as supervisors. The establishment of the Post-Graduate School, has had a subtle but distinct impact on the research student culture, which has slowly been modifying into a community.' In general, the external evaluator were able to confirm this positive view of the University's progress in developing and supporting its postgraduate research culture, and considered that taken together the wide-ranging support initiatives constituted good practice.

83 Through scrutiny of the strategies, policies, regulations and procedures relating to research and the administration of research degrees within the University, the external evaluator confirmed that the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students were appropriate and satisfactory and met the precepts of the Code of practice.

Section 7: Published information

84 The University publish a wide range of marketing, admissions, induction, course and regulatory

information in hard-copy and online. The University has clearly defined guidance and protocols for the preparation and approval of published material.

85 All applicants to the University receive the University welcome pack. The University Handbook, which includes web-based material links, provides a variety of information including details of

plagiarism and associate penalties. Sample prospectus and website material that was seen by the external evaluator makes this distinction clear. International Students also receive a special welcome guide.

86   The AcademicPres in partnership with the PR office offers advice and guidance for the production of publications. This group produces an annual report for the Academic Standards Committee. The report covers print publications, and the website.

Teaching quality information

87   It is a University requirement to produce programme/unit handbooks. Generally there are effective local arrangements to monitor the annual update of these handbooks.

88   Programme and unit specifications are available electronically in a central location where they can be accessed by all staff. The programme specification forms the core of the programme handbook for students. The key aspects are included and supplemented with operational and 'student-friendly' guidance. Unit specifications are provided to students either through the programme handbook, level handbook or unit guide, as appropriate to the programme. The University began uploading programme specifications onto the website during 2007-08. The programme specifications uploaded so far are available through the portal, thus allowing public access. In general, students felt that information they would need concerning programme, unit or regulatory matters was available through the student handbook or the intranet.

89   The University makes the appropriate returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency regarding student numbers.

90   The external evaluator found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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