

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT of Ovidius University Constanta, ROMANIA

Report on Constanta 'Ovidius' University. Malcolm Cook, University of Exeter, UK

I. Introduction

The evaluation report refers to the activity performed by the author as an institutional expert in the process of institutional external evaluation of „Ovidius” University Constanta, in the period 11-13 November 2009, at the request of the **Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (A.R.A.C.I.S.)**

II. Activities preliminary to the mission of evaluation

After my appointment as an expert in this project, I was informed by the scientific secretary of the evaluation mission, Oana Stanila, Ph.D - ASE Bucarest, on:

- the methodology of the evaluation mission
- the make-up of the team of evaluating experts
- the study programmes that were going to be evaluated
- the visit programme
- the modality of access to the information contained in the self evaluation reports of „Ovidius” University Constanta
- the list of contact persons, including the ones belonging to the **University** senior management team.

III. The development of the evaluation mission

The mission had two directions: the evaluation of the study programmes and institutional evaluation. The study programmes selected for the evaluation of quality were as follows: **Biology** in Biology domain; **Ecology and Environment Protection** in Environmental Science domain; **Mathematics-Informatics** in Mathematics domain; **Accounting and Business Informatics** in Accounting domain; **International Affairs** in Economy and International Affairs domain; **Pharmacy** in

Health domain; **Welding Engineering** in Industrial Engineering domain; **Economic Engineering** in **Mechanical Domain** in Engineering and management domain.

The mission programme was conceived on a pre-established calendar, known and approved by the parties involved in the evaluation process.

The visit started on November 11, 2009, at 9.00 o'clock, in the **Conference Hall** with a meeting of the A.R.A.C.I.S. team with the university management, study programmes managers, student representatives, the representative of the **Free Union of „Ovidius” University from Constanta**.

After the meeting with the management of **„Ovidius” University Constanta**, the **A.R.A.C.I.S.** team remained in the **Conference Hall** to establish the organizational details of the visit. The mission coordinator and the scientific secretary handed over the documents to the members of the team and gave them recommendations concerning the evaluation process and activity layout. Each evaluating expert had to elaborate a synthetic report of the study programme evaluation, following a SWOT analysis model, as well as a synthetic report of the meeting with students.

After the technical session, the experts went to the faculties that had in their structure the evaluated study programmes, and the external institutional commission of the A.R.A.C.I.S. started to check the achievement of the normative requirements obligatory for the external institutional evaluation of education quality of **„Ovidius” University Constanta**. (the first part of the Visit Sheet)

The whole activity was coordinated by **Professor Cornescu Viorel, Ph.D.**, from Bucharest University, the mission coordinator designated by the A.R.A.C.I.S.

The Visit Sheet was made up on the basis of the information, data and documents provided to the Evaluation Commission by the institutional contact person, **Victor PLOAE University Professor, Ph.D.**

The obligatory normative requirements concerning:

- The legal status
- Academic Chart and the regulations stipulated in it

- The institution management and management structures
- The Teaching Staff
- The material basis
- Financial activity
- Students' situation
- Research activity

Have been checked cursively by examining the Self-Evaluation Report, its annexes as well as by direct discussions with the staff related to the analysed domains.

The A.R.A.C.I.S. external institutional commission also went to different faculties to spot check the information provided by the contact persons of „Ovidius” University Constanta to form a personal opinion after the visit of the material basis/facilities (laboratories, seminar, course classrooms, reading rooms, libraries, physical education rooms).

In all cases the verification confirmed the character of conformity with the normative obligatory requirements. There was no pre-established programme for the international expert so Malcolm Cook devised his own programme with comments, as follows below.

Comments, Observations and Recommendations by Malcolm Cook, External Expert for the Evaluation

The University is a broad-based institution with a traditional management structure of Rector, vice-rectors, Deans, heads of departments, and has 16 Faculties, crossing the range of disciplines.

I visited the Institution on 11, 12, 13 November as part of the ARACIS evaluation. I had previously been sent the University's self-evaluation report which gave much information about the University. However, there was little genuine evaluation in the report and it was difficult, in advance, to get a sense of what the University was trying to achieve, apart from excellence in everything, and to appreciate the particular difficulties that the University was facing: fierce competition both within and without Romania, limited budget possibilities, an economy in recession.

I took the view that it was more useful for Aracis and the institution if I took a general perspective and considered the University in terms of its structures and internal workings rather than look specifically at the content and teaching methods in the various faculties that were quite properly being considered by experts in the team, all the more so because the faculty of letters that includes modern foreign languages, my own discipline, was not being evaluated. However, during the course of my visit I was able to visit this faculty and to meet staff, including the Dean. The faculty is housed in an impressive contemporary building with first class facilities. There is an 'American corner' that is



in receipt of funds from the US and this provides an excellent working environment for students of American studies. Throughout the meetings I had in the whole university the staff and students were courteous and helpful, forthcoming in terms of the various issues I raised and generous with their answers and their time. I got the impression that this was a university that knew itself well, that was conscious of the challenges it faced and that it was run by team of highly competent individuals who were ambitious for the university and who sought to make improvements across the board.

I looked in detail at the working of the following:

The International Relations operation

The University has considerable experience in this area that is managed by a vice-rector with a small team (of 2) of very young staff. They work in cramped offices and have a considerable workload – they seek opportunities by identifying international conferences where Ovidius staff might be present. There seems to be a University strategy of accumulation and there are dangers here – having too many partners may look more like opportunism than precise strategy. I would recommend that the University reviews its collaborative effort and seeks to work within agreed guidelines – there should be a move towards a hierarchy of partnerships with selected partners – based no doubt on personal contacts but also on profiles – why is the partner of interest to the University? Is it because of shared research interests, of similar future plans, even of a shared past: the University should develop a more strategic policy in this area and consider the appointment of a senior administrator who would be line-managed by the vice-rector who, in turn, would be relieved of much administrative drudgery and given more time for research and teaching. There is genuine enthusiasm in the present team but in my view it needs to have a more focussed view and it needs better support and better accommodation and made part of a central unit.

Erasmus

A visit to the Erasmus office where I met the young member of staff on duty, was of interest. It is university policy to expand the number of agreements and exchanges but one is tempted to consider why this should be a policy driver. The University sends more students to other countries than it receives and this can lead to problems of imbalance. One obvious reason for this is the lack of a dedicated programme to teach Romanian to incoming students – such provision is available but it must be chosen as part of the study agreement. Since nearly all teaching in the University is done in Romanian, the policy will need to be reconsidered. Romanian is not a language much taught in many European universities and this will be a factor in discouraging students from visiting the University for an extended stay. The University will benefit from an enrichment of cultural exchange with a population that is more evidently international. The other possibility that will need to be considered is that some courses might need to be delivered in another language – English, possibly, or Spanish or French or German. This is a big cultural decision that will need courage and commitment and it is something that will require considerable planning as staff will need to be trained and prepared and resources sought. At a further small meeting with students requested by myself one student commented that the resource available from the Erasmus grant was not sufficient to allow her to

study abroad. There is no obvious solution to this, other than finding internal scholarship money for deserving cases.

In short, while the University must be applauded for its ambition to become an international university it must be put into other perspectives: the desire to move into a higher research league where research is the key driver and where teaching is maintained at the current excellent level but does not become the major defining policy driver.

Research Management

The University has high ambitions in the research area and yet the resource put into research management is tiny. Again a very small team of dedicated staff who are proficient and highly competent cannot do justice to the research effort of nearly 800 staff. A properly constituted research office would define targets for the institution, would seek out research opportunities and would work with individuals or teams in preparation of grant applications and in managing grant activity. I was told that the Head of Department is responsible for the research output of colleagues in the department, and this is normal. But if the University wants to emerge as a significant research institution it will have to change the mission of the university and define targets for individuals and for teams. Different disciplines have different outputs but each one should define the best 5 or 6 journals in their field and target them, probably writing in English to capture a wider audience (with support from the central office if necessary). The University may also want to define targets for research income for individuals and for teams and to monitor activity on an annual basis, rewarding those staff who achieve or surpass their targets. Research is a highly specialised area and the University might benefit from visiting the research office of one of its partner institutions, to see how activity is managed in a competitive environment. The University might also want to consider how it can work with local and national industry and institutions in order that its research expertise might produce useful income for the university. The University needs to expand its available income in order to pump-prime areas it wishes to develop. At the moment it is living from hand to mouth and with an ambitious building programme, money is in short supply.

Press/Public Relations

Here I found a further example of highly enthusiastic, very competent and congenial staff working somewhat in isolation, producing information about the university in a professional manner and material that is pleasing to the eye and informative. This is an important area of activity as the University seeks to move forward and it might want to consider making the operation more mainstream and building up the professional staff so that all the operations, press, contact with external bodies, the media, public relations generally are all taking place in the same or in contiguous offices.

At the moment this office manages the open gates and university coach service, taking the University to the surrounding area – this work is specialised and not necessarily connected to public relations – typically an admissions office would manage all university admissions for home and overseas students, and would work with departments and faculties in delivering the corporate message.

Quality Office

Quality management seems to me to be a real strength of the University. Each Faculty has an individual responsible for quality in the Faculty and for the management of it and these people work closely with the central office – manned again by two young enthusiasts – who manage a quality commission that reports to senate and for which the Rector accepts primary responsibility. Every programme is evaluated by students and there is a standard form for this activity. Programme coordinators draw up a swot analysis for their programmes and these in turn are analysed by the quality office that produces a composite paper. The University has a quality manual as does each faculty. Quality is a strength of the institution, and it is based on close adherence to the European Standards and Guidelines. At the meeting with students from different faculties general satisfaction was expressed about the quality and management of teaching.

Where the University might want to consider changes is in the area of quality enhancement – what does the institution do to spread good practice to reward excellent teachers, how is good practice disseminated across the institution? How can a good institution become better?

Conciliation and Orientation Office

This is a relatively new initiative and seeks to offer advice to students about work and employment prospects. It is building up a database of students and student alumni in order that more cooperation might take place between students and recent graduates. It is also seeking to establish what employers want from the graduates, feeding this information into Faculties so that the curriculum might be modified. The meeting with Employers on the second day, while extremely supportive, did lead me to believe that more discussion might take place about local needs of business and industry, leading perhaps to some innovative programmes: for example, engineering and management. In many universities there is dedicated external relations office whose role is to manage the relationship with local businesses, to organise seminars for local business people, and to develop a relationship that is of mutual benefit.

It is clear that the University student management system needs to be improved or changed and that the knowledge of former graduates might be harnessed for the good of the University. In the longer term alumni might want to contribute to the well-being of the university so it is important to maintain contact with them, send them regular updates about the University and its developments, building strong and lasting relationships of mutual benefit.

Thursday: Student experience

I decided to devote much of this day to what we would call the 'student experience'. What is it like to be a student at Ovidius Constanta?

Sports Facilities

I was able to visit the Faculty of Sports Science with a view to inspect the sports facilities offered to students across the University. The facilities are impressive: modern, well maintained, fully equipped and certainly fit for purpose. There is no doubt that they offer excellent opportunities to students to maintain their fitness and well-being.

University Residence

I visited a university residence that was brand new and occupied by some 400 students. The students lived in shared accommodation, something that would be seen as unusual in the UK and in France, but the students were clearly happy with what was offered to them and with the facilities they could share. The building is well-placed and fully equipped. I was also given the opportunity to visit the medical facility in the building where healthcare is available for students. Again, the provision was first class and free for students.

Library

The library is undergoing a large expansion with state of the art facilities and equipment designed to take it into a new age with the emphasis on electronic material. Although not yet fully open I was able to visit it and could see that the new facility will greatly enhance the student experience. The library represents an important and well managed resource for the student population and we heard no adverse comments about it during our visit.

Dentistry

I was taken to the department of dental health, primarily because I wanted to see the kind of care that was available to students. The visit was pretty much unplanned so I was able to see the team in full operation and to speak to some of the students being cared for. Once again there was general



satisfaction about the treatment on offer, further confirming the view that the students at the University are well cared for. The building was certainly fit for purpose but was showing signs of age and will need to be renovated in the not too distant future.

At a small meeting with students that I requested two students from the Faculty of Letters commented that there were not enough rooms for all the classes to take place and that they sometimes had to wander across the building looking for a suitable space. It was not possible to verify this.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I was present at all the formal meetings with the evaluation team, the students, graduates and employers. Not speaking Romanian was a disadvantage, of course, although I was ably assisted by a young member of the University staff whose English was excellent. My own view is that the meetings were too large to be of much use – there were too many people present and in my experience more is derived from smaller groups where there is a more intimate exchange of views. For that reason I requested a smaller meeting with a small group of students on the final day.

The first meeting with the team and students, with no university staff present for obvious reasons, was extremely positive. The students were not official representatives but were taken from a selection of Faculties: they were supportive of the staff and the proximity to staff that they enjoyed, the teaching facilities in the buildings and the learning resources available to them. There were no adverse comments in that meeting but in a subsequent meeting that I had alone with a group of students, they commented that there were sometimes curriculum issues that needed to be resolved (but they understood the process of how to achieve change) and in dentistry there were problems with the age of some of the materials that were not fit for purpose – clearly a financial issue to be resolved.

The meeting with graduates was similarly positive although it was clear that some of the graduates still had very close links to the university and were not sufficiently detached to provide an objective view. Again, there were no critical comments.

The meeting with Employers was also very positive. I did feel that the University might want to develop closer links with this group of people, perhaps meeting on a regular basis to develop real partnerships for mutual benefit (see also my comments below).

This is a high class institution that we visited at a moment of innovation and renewal. There is no doubt that this is an excellent teaching institution with high standards and a well-embedded quality



culture. I heard no adverse comments from students, staff or indeed employers at any time during my visit. I have broad confidence in the high quality of the institution.

The University has ambitious research aims and this will require further effort at every level, particularly of course at the level of the teaching and research staff. I believe that the University is willing to make this change but it is one that will need a well defined strategy and a staged approach. In particular, it will need to create time for researchers to carry out their mission and publish in major journals and with major publishers. It may wish to consider the establishment of programme of sabbatical leave for active researchers, paid for by accepting commensurate in teaching load for others, recognising that the leave is a right to be shared by all.

The management of teaching is first class, with Deans playing a leading role in the assurance of quality, aided by the support of the central quality office under the control of the Rector. This office and the work they do (see above) is an example, in my view, of best practice. Of particular note, as I learned in the final meeting with students, is the high quality of feedback that is prompt and useful.

The students I met are enthusiastic and eager, bright and intelligent and with language skills that are admirable. The learning resources available to them are first class – well equipped buildings, modern facilities, excellent academic, pastoral and medical care.

What struck me as particularly unusual is the way the Administration of the various central functions of the University is scattered across the university, often working in cramped conditions and often being undertaken by young staff with little experience. The University will surely want to consider how it might improve this position bringing in project leaders who are full-time professionals rather than academics whose major task is surely to undertake research and to teach. That said, the system seems to work but I sense that it could be strengthened and reinforced and that the final outcome for the university will be a more powerful central administration supporting the University's objectives and striving to take the institution to a new level of achievement. This will require experience and dynamism. Young dynamic support staff were clearly visible but I wonder whether there should not be more senior managers taking the strain and organising the burden of work. I wonder too whether it would not make sense to bring the teams of administrators together so that they are close in terms of geography and can support each other.

I am not convinced that the University fully understands the implications of the Bologna process as it became apparent, in the course of discussions, that teaching was still following a traditional pattern and that student-centred learning was not a reality in every faculty. Contact hours are still very high, far too high for a university that aims to be research intensive. I recommend early engagement with a Bologna expert to discuss different ways of learning and teaching.

In short, this is a first-class teaching institution with considerable research potential that is as yet untapped. It is an institution where the students are content and where the student experience is truly excellent. My own view is that at the present stage of development the University should receive the highest possible recommendation while recognising that it is on the path of a long journey that will provide considerable challenges in the future.

Comments on the Evaluation Process



The evaluation team works little as a team, rather as a group of individuals; there is a heavy emphasis on paperwork; some of the meetings are very formal and rather long, sometimes repetitive; the role of the international expert might be better defined – is there a specific programme for him or her or does he/she devise his/her own? Mobile phones should not be used or in evidence at any formal meeting. They should be turned off as a courtesy and team members should certainly not be using them during meetings. It certainly helped to be a French speaker as many of the people I met were more fluent in French than in English.



14/11/09

Malcolm Cook, 14.11.09