



## Institutional Evaluation Programme

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



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**Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău**

## EVALUATION REPORT

*November 2013.*

Team:  
Philippe Rousseau, Chair  
Lučka Lorber  
Gintautas Bražiūnas  
Suvi Eriksson  
Don McQuillan, Team  
Coordinator



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## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau. The evaluation took place in 2013 in the framework of the project “Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and Innovation in Romanian Universities”, which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

The evaluations are taking place within the context of major reforms in the Romanian higher education system, and specifically in accordance with the provisions of the 2011 Law on Education and the various related normative acts.

While the institutional evaluations are taking place in the context of an overall reform, each university is assessed by an independent IEP team, using the IEP methodology described below.

### 1.1. The Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

1. A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
2. A European perspective
3. A peer-review approach
4. 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:

1. Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management



2. 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. Profile of the Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau; national context and autonomy

Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau (UVAB) is an accredited public institution of higher education that started life in 1961 as the Pedagogical Institute of Bacau. In 1991 it achieved its present status. The city of Bacau, with a population of 144,000, is the capital city of the county of Bacau located in the central part of Moldavia. The university has two campuses, five faculties and thirteen departments:

**Engineering:** Mechanical and Environmental Engineering; Mechanical Systems Engineering and Management; Industrial Systems Engineering and Management; Power Engineering, Mechatronics, and Computer Science; Chemical and Food Engineering

**Letters:** Foreign Languages and Literature; Romanian Language and Literature, and Communication Sciences

**Sciences:** Mathematics, Informatics and Education Sciences; Biology, Ecology, and Environmental Protection

**Economic Sciences:** Marketing and Management; Accounting, Auditing, Economic and Financial Analysis

**Movement, Sports and Health Sciences:** Physical Education and Sports Performance; Kinesotherapy and Occupational Therapy.

Research activity is coordinated by the Institute for Research, Development, Innovation, Consultancy, and Technological Transfer that includes the research centres and research laboratories.

In the academic year 2012-2013, the total number of students was 5 133, including students in full attendance, reduced attendance and those in distance learning courses. Overall there were 4 094 students in 34 Bachelor study programmes, 1 012 in 32 Masters programmes, and



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27 in three doctoral programmes (industrial engineering, mechanical engineering, environmental engineering).

Over the past five years there has been a steady decrease in the number of full-time students. According to the SER this is due to demographic decline, the economic crisis and stricter standards in the baccalaureate examinations. However UVAB numbers have held up well by comparison with some other universities where, we were informed, numbers have fallen by as much as 50%. There is a total of 238 academic staff (Annex 8 of SER): 45 professors, 42 associate professors, 66 lecturers, 53 junior lecturers and 36 assistants; 97% hold the PhD degree. There are 50 administrative staff and 71 auxiliary staff.

As noted above, the present evaluation takes place in the context of an institutional evaluation of Romanian universities. The process aims primarily at:

1. evaluating the extent to which each university fulfils its stated institutional mission;
2. supporting universities in further improving quality provision and strategic management capacity through targeted recommendations;
3. supporting universities in enhancing their institutional quality assurance mechanisms;
4. providing policy inputs through cluster reports and a final system review report that will support the Romanian authorities in further developing higher education policies.

### *Autonomy*

It would appear that the university has broad autonomy by the Law of 2011 and the University Charter: academic autonomy; governance autonomy in relation to strategic management by freely elected entities; administrative autonomy; financial autonomy; human resources autonomy.

In practice however the freedom of the university to act is severely circumscribed by regulations laid down by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and the Ministry of Education (MECTS). Indeed, in our meetings, we found widespread discontent at the inability of UVAB to act in a timely fashion on even minor matters without the explicit consent of the minister, especially in the area of finance. New educational programmes can take up to five years before obtaining final approval. The team heard of continual changes in rules and protocols ordered from the government or the minister of education. The most recent of these is "Emergency ordinance no.77 from 26 June 2013" which includes a series of requirements on management positions in universities.



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EUA supports strong autonomy for higher education institutions, which today find themselves in a rapidly changing environment and facing challenges that are by now well known: increased competition for scarce resources, massification of education, economic globalisation with resulting demands from government and society for more and better trained graduates, especially in the sciences, the need to establish improved research capabilities for assisting/underpinning national competitiveness. Romanian universities face the additional challenges of falling student numbers and industrial retrenchment. Autonomy is a necessary prerequisite for speedily responding to these challenges. On the other hand, it is well recognised that autonomy is bound up with accountability to society, and that accountability brings with it the responsibility to drive the required change and improvement. Thus HEIs must use their autonomy and independence for positive strategic development and involvement with society according to its expectations and needs.

These remarks are of particular relevance to the University of Bacau which bears a direct responsibility to act as a driver for the cultural, social and economic development of its region. The city of Bacau has been particularly hard hit in recent years by demographic changes, and industrial and business decline. Census figures show the population has fallen from 205,029 in 1992 to 144,307 in 2011. A representative of the Chamber of Commerce informed the team that in 1990 Bacau was ranked fifth industrial city in Romania, but today it is nineteenth.

UVAB must be given the academic freedom to respond in a speedy and appropriate fashion to the serious challenges we have outlined here. It is clear from the list of its departments and the high academic qualifications of the staff that the university has the expertise readily available to make an important contribution to revitalising the region, but it is thwarted by unnecessary bureaucratic barriers.

We urge the authorities to ease the bureaucratic burden placed on UVAB and similar highly regarded universities in Romania. The authorities should trust qualified and professional academics to do the job that their training and experience have prepared them for; they should be allowed to react speedily to the challenges facing the modern university.

### 1.3. The evaluation process

The self-evaluation report was drafted and finalised by a work group appointed by a decision of the rector. The group was chaired by the president of the Senate and consisted of seven senior members of the academic staff, who were representatives of the five faculties and all leading structures of the university, the general administrative director, the chief accountant, and a student. Input was requested from all sections of the university and drafts of the report



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were circulated to the university community via the intranet network. The SER was clearly written and contained much useful information.

The self-evaluation report, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in good time, a month before the first visit. The visits of the evaluation team took place from 24 to 26 April 2013 and from 8 to 11 October 2013 respectively. In between the visits the university provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

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

- Professor Philippe Rousseau, former Rector, University of Lille 3, France, team chair
- Professor Lučka Lorber, Vice-Rector for Quality Development, University of Maribor, Slovenia
- Professor Gintautas Bražiūnas, Rector, Vilnius University of Applied Science, Lithuania
- Suvi Eriksson, student, University of Oulu, Finland
- Professor Don McQuillan, former Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board, Ireland, team coordinator

The team would like to warmly acknowledge the cooperation and hospitality received throughout the two visits. We thank the Rector, Professor Dr Valentin Nedeff, who signed the invitation letter, the vice-rectors and other leaders who actively supported us, and all the staff and students, as well as stakeholders from outside the institution, for their helpful contribution to the discussions. We thank Professor Dr Gabriel Lazar, President of the Senate, for organising the documentation, liaising with the team and maintaining our daily schedule. We trust that our joint efforts will provide a sound springboard for UVAB as it moves into the next phase of its evolution.

## 2. Vision, Mission, Strategy

According to the Charter "the mission of Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau is a didactic mission and one of scientific research; it is focused on regional necessities and favours partnerships with academic and economic entities, both nationally and internationally". This is an excellent formulation of the university's mission, highlighting both the academic role of UVAB as well as its crucial role as a driver of regional development.

The vision of the university is "participation in the creation of culture and civilisation values, in the development of scientific research and their integration in the national and international exchange". This is a classic formulation. But the teaching and learning function



of the university finds no mention – a future where the excellent teachers, engineers, business graduates, entrepreneurs, graduates in sport and therapy, are contributing in a central way to society, both locally and nationally.

Since the vision, together with the mission, is key to establishing authentic aims and objectives, the present vision statement has the potential to distort the emphasis on strategic planning.

**The team recommends that the university should revise the vision statement to highlight the importance of the teaching and learning responsibility of the university.**

### *Strategic Planning*

Annex 1 of the SER contains the Strategic Plan for 2012-2015. The plan has ten strategic objectives with a brief statement of the measures to be taken to achieve the objectives. The university suggests three priority areas:

1. consolidation and development of degree programmes, doctoral programmes in certain domains, and postgraduate and lifelong learning courses;
2. modernisation of academic programmes and improvement of training and educational process in correlation with the labour market;
3. development of scientific and technological research activity with the aim of integrating it into the national and international scientific community, with respect to local and regional demand and specificity.

The objectives cover all activities of a university and are too extensive to undertake over a three-year period. The choice of priorities is wise, focusing on the key academic activities. But again the scope is extensive and vague as to detail, with no indication as to how the objectives will be achieved.

The university should look again in a critical and analytic way at where it wants to go in the coming years, how it envisions its future in the regional, national and international contexts. How does an underfunded university fulfil its crucial teaching, research and development role in the local region? How best to work with the local community and the regional government? How does it prioritise and focus on a small number of sustainable (possibly expensive) research areas?

Strategic planning has been described as “the continuous and collective exercise of foresight in the integrated process of taking informed decisions affecting the future”. Thus the planning must be continuous in application and updating; it must be collective, all voices must be





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heard; it must be integrated, a forging of plans from faculties, etc.; it must be informed, based on factual and up-to-date information. It is not a wish list, a collection of desirable outcomes with no indication as to how these outcomes can be achieved, nor is it a compilation of departmental or faculty plans. On the contrary, the process of developing an effective strategic plan is complex and intensive. We suggest that three basic questions be kept in mind:

Where is the university positioned now?

Where does the university want to go?

How will the university get there?

We suggest that UVAB re-examine the answer to the first of these questions with a new SWOT analysis, carried through in the light of the present IEP evaluation experience. The second question addresses the vision and mission of the university, and the detailed objectives to be achieved, say over the next four years. We urge the university to give its close attention to precisely formulating realistic statements that clearly reflect UVAB's aspirations at department, faculty, university, national and international level. The answer to the third question requires a detailed presentation of the steps to be taken in achieving the objectives. Good organisation and agreed procedures are essential. The objectives should be prioritised, and each objective should be stated in a clear and unambiguous way. An action plan for the successful achievement of each objective should be established, responsibility for completion assigned, and allocation of required resources agreed. Each objective should have a time frame for completion and precise indicators of success should be set down beforehand.

**The team recommends that the university should set up a Strategic Planning Committee, chaired by the rector, with the remit of establishing a realistic strategic plan in a prescribed time scale, and the responsibility to monitor its implementation and ongoing updating.**

We emphasise that planning is a continuous process. Thus the plan itself and the SWOT on which it is based must be updated on an ongoing basis. This requires solid data to support conclusions and to position the university to meet new developments.

**The team recommends that UVAB should establish a capability for the collection of data needed to update the strategic plan on an ongoing basis.**

A sense of ownership of the strategic plan throughout the university is essential to the success of the process. This could be achieved using a fairly common methodology, one already used in UVAB. Following precise guidelines prepared by the leadership, each of the faculties might prepare an agreed plan based on contributions from the individual



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departments. These plans could then be confronted with the university's vision and aims, and harmonised by the Strategic Planning Committee, to produce an overarching strategic plan for the whole university. The plan should be discussed widely, and then finalised and approved by the Senate.

### 3. Governance and institutional decision-making

Before going into detail on governance, the team would like to record its appreciation of several important factors that contribute to the well-ordered running of this university. In our discussions and meetings across the institution we found great commitment to UVAB, and impressive dedication and unity of purpose. There is strong leadership at both university and faculty level, and the students are effectively involved in the governing bodies at all levels.

The central administration office staff that we met were an impressive group, dedicated first-class professionals.

The Charter specifies the following structures:

1. **University Senate.** The University Senate is composed of 32 academic staff and 11 students, and is the highest decision-making and deliberative body of the university. It elects a president by secret ballot who chairs the Senate meetings. The Senate endorses the rector's proposals for the strategic plan, the structure of the university, the draft budget, the budget execution, regulations concerning the organisation, and functioning of the university.
2. **Rector.** The rector is elected by direct and secret ballot of all academic staff and the students in the Senate and faculty boards. The rector is the legal representative of the university in relationships with third parties, and is the chief executive and main credit release of the university. There are four vice-rectors appointed by the rector.
3. **Administrative Board.** The Administrative Board comprises the rector, the vice-rectors, the faculty deans, the general administrative director, and a student representative.

We note that faculty deans are not elected by the faculty, but rather by an application procedure that, while preserving some faculty input, leaves the rector with great influence in the final appointment.

It seems appropriate to comment here about the dual role of the deans. On the one hand, they represent the faculty in its relations with the university and must push for approval of the faculty's decisions at university level. On the other hand, as members of the Administrative Board, they must act as officers of the university. There is a risk of a conflict of interests arising.



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The Administrative Board is the executive branch of the governance structures with the rector as chief executive officer, while the Senate is the legislative branch. In our discussions across the university there were mixed feelings about these new arrangements, as opposed to the previous arrangement whereby the rector was the central power. It is certainly not without the potential for instability and future conflict, since smooth interaction between the two branches will very much depend on good will between the main actors, especially the rector and the president of the Senate. Of course the university is well aware of this issue.

The role of each vice-rector is mirrored by a corresponding commission in the Senate. This is a common-sense approach that helps avoid unfocused debate in the Senate: thus a vice-rector works with the corresponding Senate commission to prepare the outline of legislation that is then debated by the full Senate. This approach also helps to maintain a balance between the roles of the Administrative Board and the Senate. However there is also the potential for fragmentation of responsibility. The team was told that meetings of the Senate usually last about an hour. If this is the case then there is a danger that core issues may not get the full consideration in the Senate that they merit.

The rector is not a member of the Senate. It seems to the team that this must hamper the effective introduction to the Senate of actions proposed by the Administrative Board. We believe that the rector's non-voting membership of the Senate would facilitate the orderly governance of the university.

**The team recommends that the rector should be a non-voting member of the Senate.**

The exclusion of administrative staff from membership of the Senate is a cause for concern. In our opinion they are crucial to the successful daily operation of the university as well as to the effective implementation of future strategies. They would make a valuable contribution to debate in the Senate.

**The team recommends that administrative staff should be represented in the Senate.**

The team regrets that representatives of civil society have no formal voice in the running of the university and urges UVAB to seek means of rectifying their exclusion. The law does not allow them to be members of the Senate, but pending a change in the law the university should find a way to give a formal consultative role to the external stakeholders. The inclusion of members of civil society in university governance, if only on a consultative basis, is not unusual in many countries, and has clear advantages both for society and the university: the autonomy granted to the university is balanced by public and transparent accountability to the society that maintains it; the university has a direct line to social and economic developments in the region; the university has immediate access to regional advice when preparing its strategic plan.



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**The team recommends that the university should find a way to give a formal consultative role to external stakeholders, especially in the area of strategic planning.**

The team would like to comment on the large number of regulations and reports, both internal and external that are required at present in running UVAB. Of course the university is powerless to reduce the external regulations and reporting required by ARACIS and the Ministry, and obviously the orderly functioning of a university requires some internal control. However too much control can overburden an already stretched teaching staff; they often have to spend time on routine and unnecessary tasks, time which would be better spent on their scholarly work.

The university is busy setting up new structures and organising new departments to carry through the initiatives envisioned in the Law and the Charter. It is important to bear in mind that very similar work has been successfully carried out in many universities in many countries. Good practice has been established in key areas of university activities. UVAB should benchmark against good practice elsewhere and avoid re-inventing the wheel.

Many functions of the university are decentralised at the level of departments and faculties. While the team was told during the interviews with the university leadership that relations between the centre and the faculties are good, experience shows that strong faculty autonomy often leads to a “fortress faculty” mentality that makes it difficult to establish university-wide coherent strategies or organise effective interdisciplinary cooperation.

**The team recommends that the centre of gravity of the university should move towards the centre.**

The work of the university will be greatly enhanced by the creation of an integrated database.

**The team recommends that the university should develop an integrated database.**



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## 4. Teaching and Learning

As a teaching university UVAB is performing well. It is to be congratulated on the introduction of the formal structures advocated by the Bologna Process. ECTS has been introduced, all degrees offered by the university have been adapted to the Bachelor-Master-PhD model, and the Diploma Supplement is available to students. The team had excellent meetings with a wide cross-section of students all of whom expressed satisfaction with their courses and teachers, as well as the services provided by the university, e.g. the canteen, the dormitory, the sports facilities. All were glad they had chosen UVAB for their university studies. Some had come from as far afield as Bucharest because of the high reputation of the university in their chosen study programme. There is good communication and interaction between teachers and students. The university promotes an open door policy so teachers are available to students for consultation. The university is active in recruiting new students of good quality in a variety of ways, including open door days and the organisation of fairs.

It may not be necessary, but useful just the same, to point out that moving to a student-centred teaching and learning structure often requires a difficult mindset adjustment: formal lectures balanced and augmented by supervised and well-organised, small self-study and group-study assignments, by tutorials, workshops and an increase in project work. The team is aware that several faculties have already totally or partially adopted this approach, but strongly encourages all faculties to drive this development in close cooperation with the students.

Student questionnaires on courses and teachers are a routine part of the university's quality assurance activities. It is crucial that this process should be formative and directed at improving the quality of teaching and learning, and must never become a blame game. This can lead to a continuing dialogue between teachers and students, an important element in developing a climate where real improvement can take place and a culture of quality can be developed. A note of warning here: the SER refers to the impossibility of establishing salaries for the academic staff as a reflection of scientific and didactic performances (SER, Weakness nr 6). Experience elsewhere shows that relating teachers' salaries to student evaluations can be harmful to the enhancement of the educational process and lead to grade inflation.

There is a willingness to modernise the study programmes (strategic objective 1.2) and take into account the evolution of the needs of society and the labour market, in spite of the constraints imposed by the external evaluation process in Romania. For example, the team was told that the occupational therapy department had a protracted struggle with ARACIS, which was eventually successful, to gain approval for a course that was new to Romania but



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already part of recognised good practice abroad.

The SER notes that the promotion of student-centred education is an important objective of the university, and in this context we congratulate UAVB on its development of a strong e-learning capacity. We stress that this modernising approach will be greatly facilitated by the modularisation of courses. The team is aware that some faculties have already begun this process, but was told there is resistance to change in some parts of the university. We urge the university to proceed at top speed with the introduction of this important initiative in all faculties. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of modularisation in the evolution of the modern university and the effective implementation of Bologna.

The process of examining closely the desired outcomes of programmes and courses, followed by a breakdown into coherent modules, is a fruitful exercise in itself and by its nature contributes to a review of curricula. The content of each module should be set in terms of learning outcomes. Key competences should be systematically fostered and emphasised. Information to students should contain an explanation of the overall aims and purpose of each module, with prerequisite courses clearly indicated, benchmarks for student learning and achievements, clear guidelines on written and project work, principles on marking and feedback to students. Many universities now include a set of student rights and responsibilities in their handbooks, and examples of these are easily found on the Internet.

Modularisation will influence many of the developments already planned by the university. It will simplify the structuring and organisation of interdisciplinary studies both for students and the university, and indeed may point the way to new combinations of subjects for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work. It will facilitate the creation of joint degree programmes within the university and with universities in Romania and abroad, and help mobility between universities. More generally the SER notes that “a weakness for all Romanian universities is the lack of national mobilities that will lead to an increase in transparency and dissemination of good practices”. At undergraduate level modularisation opens up the possibility of a more effective use of resources by identifying or indeed creating courses which could be regarded as core courses for all or many students in different faculties.

Modularisation will contribute to transparency in the university’s dealings with students, and indeed with society as a whole, and in particular with the industrial and business community. Visiting students from abroad will be enabled to easily construct a study programme, while the implementation of ECTS will be simplified.

**The team recommends that all courses in the university should be modularised. For each module, information to students should contain precise descriptions of:**

- 1. prerequisite modules, and learning outcomes rather than inputs**



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2. **core competences to be fostered**
3. **the overall aims and purpose of the module, benchmarks for student learning and achievements, clear guidelines on written and project work, principles on assessment and feedback to students.**

**The team recommends that the university makes use of the modular course structure to create interdisciplinary study programmes, as well as joint degrees both within the university and with other universities in Romania and abroad.**

The university is developing good relations with local business enterprises, and the local community in general. This has led to mutually beneficial cooperation and collaboration on a variety of regional initiatives. In this context the university's developing internship programme is of great value to students. It not only provides them with experience and knowledge of the realities of work in the "real" world, but often leads to a permanent job after graduation. It was suggested during discussions with staff and external stakeholders that student practical projects and internships should take place earlier on in the curriculum, and that the internship programme should be greatly expanded. These are ideas that merit careful study by the university.

Staff development and training are central to the points considered here, and we commend the university for its efforts in this area. We note that the improvement of the training and educational process forms part of Strategic Objective 1.2. We stress that it is of the utmost importance that training in teaching and modern presentation should be available to the teaching staff and that mechanisms for sharing good practice in teaching should be in place. This is particularly true of teachers who are in the early stages of their careers. The university is aware that the new emphasis on learning will highlight the necessity to provide guidance to staff members in new methodologies, in modern methods of communication, and in mutually beneficial interaction with students. International student and staff exchange programmes will be helpful here and provide useful benchmarking against good practice in other countries. We suggest that a formalised approach with appropriate supports would greatly enhance the university's work in this area.

**The team recommends that the university should establish a Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) with responsibility for staff development and training, including new and experimental ways of teaching and learning.**

The SER notes that the university has established a university alumni association. This is an excellent development, obviously in its early stages. Indeed in our meeting with graduates of the university none of those present had heard about it. Alumni associations maintain and fortify contact with graduates and strengthen the good will in the community toward the university. This process of maintaining effective close contact with graduates embeds the



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university further in the community, and in turn will be helpful to new graduates in finding employment. This should go hand in hand with a systematic process for tracking UVAB's graduates and creating a database on what they do, where they go, their opinion on teaching and courses. This will provide valuable information for curricular reform and care of undergraduates.

**The team recommends that the university should activate the alumni association.**

## 5. Research

Research activity is coordinated by the Institute for Research, Development, Innovation, Consultancy, and Technological Transfer. The Institute includes the research centres and research laboratories. As we noted earlier a priority strategic objective of the university is the "development of scientific and technological research activity with the aim of integrating it into the national and international scientific community, with respect of local and regional demand and specificity".

In recent years the university has collaborated on 41 research projects with a variety of national and international partners, with 19 funded from European sources; on five of these UVAB was the coordinator. Between 2008 and 2012 the university had 51 research contracts with local stakeholders. Thus there is research cooperation both at regional and international level, though this varies from faculty to faculty. Income from research dropped sharply between 2008 and 2010 from an average of approximately 3 250 euro per academic staff member to 1 000 euro. Recent years have seen an increase to 2 200 euro in 2012. While these sums are modest they also reflect the tough competition for dwindling research support in economically difficult times. The number of research papers published in ISI Thomson journals is fairly low but on the increase, from an average of 0.08 per academic staff member in 2010 to an average of 0.14 in 2012 (Annex 25). There is a drive to achieve an increase of 5% per year, with financial incentives for successful researchers. More generally we note that the university makes an important contribution to research by publishing scientific journals that have scientific boards with international representatives and are included in international databases.

These facts bring us back to questions we asked earlier. How does an underfunded university fulfil its crucial teaching, research and development role in the region? How best to work with the local community and the regional government? How does it prioritise and focus on a small number of sustainable (possibly expensive) research areas? Where does it find the money to upgrade ageing research facilities? Research activity is crucial to the good name of a university and to the self-esteem of the staff. It informs teaching and can bring financial rewards. But the university cannot excel in all areas. The SER notes that UVAB has an





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oversized research structure (Weakness no. 5). Priorities are needed, priorities that hopefully are in tune with the university's obligations to regional development in economically difficult times.

**The team recommends that the university should:**

- 1. Redefine the nature of research in the institution and create an overarching strategy to build a research base compatible with the (revised) vision**
- 2. Clearly define its priorities and establish an ongoing action plan for their implementation**

## **6. Service to society**

It was clear from our meetings with stakeholders that business, education and community leaders appreciate the important contribution the university makes to the region. They hold UVAB in high esteem. More than 40 representatives of a wide variety of business enterprises, as well as representatives of local government and education, came to talk with the team, and we heard many tributes to the quality of the university's graduates and the developing level of productive interaction between UVAB and the region. For instance, we were told that 90% of teachers under the age of 40 in the county of Bacau are graduates of UVAB. We heard from the financial director of a company that 50% of their 2,600 employees received their training in the university, that undergraduate students come for practice periods, and that he, like many others, wants more collaboration with UVAB. The SER records a list of 51 research contracts with local stakeholders between 2008 and 2012.

There was a high level of agreement however that much more needs to be done to strengthen collaboration between the business sector and the university. We heard that there are 10,000 companies in the county employing 90,000 people; reference was made to the dramatic demographic decline in the region and the serious drop in industrial activity: industrial turnover has dropped from 3.5 billion euro to 2.5 billion euro over three years, with a large number of small enterprises closing down. Many felt that the university could do more to help drive economic recovery. Other speakers praised UVAB's openness to discussing suggestions on curricular design, but at least one speaker felt that more could be achieved in this area. Some asked for less theoretical material in the courses and a greater orientation to practice, so that graduates would be better prepared for the labour market. The poor employability of graduates of the Engineering Faculty points to the need to revise current study programmes and introduce new ones; it is unlikely that old industries will revive, while the modern labour market will demand graduates with skills and knowledge that are different from those of the past.

The team notes that the drive for interaction with business enterprises usually comes from



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individual teachers or from faculties. We believe that this process would be greatly facilitated by a systematised approach at university level.

**The team recommends that the university should systematise its collaboration with external partners by:**

- 1. Establishing a forum for regular discussion with local employers**
- 2. Closer articulation between student training and the needs of employers in the region.**

Employability of graduates is a central objective of UVAB and the team recognises that the university already invests time and effort in helping graduates find employment. Indeed several students told us they had received great help from teachers when seeking a job. We have two comments in this context:

1. The Faculty of Economic Sciences organises courses in entrepreneurship to inform students on how to start and run their own businesses after graduation. This is an important development that is good for graduates and good for the Bacau region, and we commend the faculty on this initiative.
2. The SER notes that the university has established a Careers Counselling Department. However, none of the students we spoke to, undergraduates or graduates, seemed to be aware of its existence. This made it difficult for us to assess its effectiveness. We would like to stress the importance of a careers office in driving the university's efforts to find jobs for its graduates, and recall the usual remit of such a department: establishing contact between students and industry for the exchange of information on posts available and graduates qualified to take up the posts, helping students to prepare for interviews, inviting employers to speak to groups of senior students on employer expectations, arranging interviews, and building up a database on its activities. This is another effective way to embed the university in the working life of the community and maintain contact with graduates and employers.

The university makes an important contribution to the community with its organisation of lifelong learning programmes of professional training. The university offers 12 programmes of lifelong professional training and development, 13 three-semester programmes of professional conversion, and two professional training programmes for adults.



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## 7. Quality culture

The quality of higher education has emerged as a key element in the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, and in driving national progress and competitiveness. Thus quality assurance is one of the main action items of the Bologna Process. In the Berlin and Bergen Communiqués the European Ministers of Higher Education committed to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level, and stressed **the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance**. As will be seen below our emphasis on the latter aspiration has special reference to UVAB. They also stressed that the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.

UVAB is well aware of these basic principles and has put in place a system of regulations, committees and procedures for quality assurance designed to put them into practice. The system fulfils national legal requirements. The students take an active part in the procedures and are satisfied with the feedback from teachers on student questionnaires and the quality of the extensive services provided by the university. At the level of faculties and departments there is a systematic examination of teaching and learning, research, the effectiveness of study programmes, and the efficient organisation of administrative units. ISO standards have been implemented, an excellent development for administrative and other non-academic activities and procedures.

The team feels however that the organisation of academic QA is too complex and fragmented, and the methodology too time-consuming and formulaic. Indeed it is reminiscent of accreditation processes with its insistence on form-filling and reporting. It takes time away from the core duties of teaching and research. Responsibility is scattered across many committees and individuals. The requirements for the assessment of individuals are intrusive rather than stimulating and improvement oriented. While the system has the important merit of reviewing all activities of the university it is too cumbersome, especially for a small university of 5 000 students. The team believes it will not achieve the university's goal of quality enhancement and the creation of a quality culture. The system does not provide enough space for self-analysis and self-criticism, nor opportunity for a department, or whatever entity is being evaluated, to present its unique features and to internalise the process. We have noted elsewhere the importance of benchmarking against good practice in other universities and other countries, especially when undertaking a new initiative. In the case of quality assurance there are examples of very good practice around Europe and we urge UVAB to do some homework in this area.



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EUA proposes a coherent QA policy for Europe, with procedures that minimise bureaucracy and cost, and avoids over regulation: with the active contribution of students, universities must monitor and evaluate all their activities, including study programmes, departments, faculties, research productivity, innovativeness, competitiveness, management, funding systems and services. The procedures must promote academic and organisational quality, respect institutional autonomy, develop internal quality cultures, and, what is important in the UVAB context, we repeat, minimise bureaucracy and cost, and avoid over regulation.

An adaptation of the IEP review methodology for a university unit (department, faculty, academic programme, student services, etc.), suitable for UVAB might be as follows:

1. A self-evaluation report is prepared under appropriate headings detailing the work and activities of the unit. The emphasis is on reflection, analysis and an honest critique.
2. A peer review group, to include at least one expert from abroad, reads the self-evaluation report and spends a number of days on a site visit to the unit. The review group completes a report on their findings that emphasises recommendations for improvement.
3. The unit draws up a quality improvement plan based on the recommendations for improvement.

These evaluations are carried out on a cyclical basis.

Crucial to success are:

1. Effective follow-up on recommendations for improvement;
2. Minimal bureaucracy;
3. Quality improvement;
4. Involvement of students and other stakeholders.

We refer to two publications of EUA: “Examining Quality Culture Part II, Processes and Tools”, and “EUA’s Quality Assurance Policy in the Context of the Bergen Communiqué”.

We note again that excellent QA systems, consistent with the EUA approach, have been developed in several countries around Europe. Nevertheless, establishing such an internal system of quality assurance takes time and commitment, and there may be an initial reluctance on the part of some staff to face the challenge of change or even to accept that change is necessary. Dialogue between all members of the university community is central to creating good will. It should be stressed that the goal is to create a quality culture in all



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activities of the university through continuous improvement, and not to apportion blame for perceived shortcomings. Again the role of the university leadership is crucial in driving the process and in facilitating the missionary work necessary to convert the doubters.

To ensure coherence and harmonisation across the university, the guidelines and operational procedures for this important work should be agreed at university level and the University Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance assigned the task of organising and overseeing the details of the procedures.

**The team recommends that the university should:**

- 1. Establish new overarching internal quality assurance procedures on the EUA model**
- 2. Under the direction of the vice-rector for quality assurance, organise and oversee the required operational procedures.**
- 3. Benchmark against good practice and invite external experts to provide training.**

Other procedures affect the quality of performance at UVAB. These include the appointment of new staff, the quality and number of incoming students and the related issue of their formation and motivation during their years in the university. The procedures for appointing professors appear to be open and transparent and totally in the hands of the university. It is essential that this important element of autonomy is maintained and that procedures are scrupulously applied. However, the difficulty of attracting talented new staff was highlighted in several discussions. Low salaries and international competition were cited. The university works hard at attracting the best local students to choose UVAB for their university studies, and the students here are happy with the education they receive. Drop-out rates in the faculties of Sciences, Economic Sciences, and MSHS are acceptable, but the faculties of Engineering and Letters should look to improve in this area. Percentage drop-out rates for the academic year 2011-2012 for these faculties were 26.1% and 33.7% respectively.



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## 8. Internationalisation

The university has a vice-rector with responsibility for international relationships and an international office. The team commends the excellent and extensive work done by the small but expert office staff. UVAB has 87 partner institutions (28 in France) in 28 countries. A few joint Master degrees have been established with universities abroad, and other joint degrees are in the development stage. The policy for the future is to develop and deepen cooperation with universities in France, Spain and Italy and to design joint degrees with the present Erasmus partners. A barrier to these activities, apart from the obvious shortage of finances, is the lack of an established methodology for accreditation. Over the past four years the university has been involved, either as coordinator or partner, in 19 international projects funded from European sources

In the academic year 2011-2012 a total of 68 UVAB students spent at least three months in foreign universities: 58 Bachelors, nine Masters and one Doctoral candidate; 16 Bachelor and four doctoral candidates came to UVAB from abroad. In the same year 36 teachers and six administrative staff went abroad for short periods. In addition there were 111 Bachelors and two Masters' students of Romanian ethnic origin from Moldova, Ukraine, Bulgaria, etc., supported through the intermediary of government programmes.

The office staff emphasised the importance of the Erasmus programme to the university. Each faculty has an international Erasmus coordinator and selection of outgoing students and staff is done at faculty level. There is a system in place to greet incoming students, provide advice to students on courses and accommodation, and arrange the transfer of credits. Students from the Faculty of Letters give free language classes to UVAB students preparing to go abroad, while students from abroad get free classes in Romanian for the duration of their stay in Bacau.

The team congratulates the university on these developments.

In the Bologna Process three action items have been emphasised for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Quality assurance is the first of these and we have discussed the creation of a robust QA system based on EUA principles earlier in this report. The second is the adoption of the Bologna degree structure. The university is to be congratulated on having this system already in place. The third is the mobility of students and teachers.

In this regard the European Ministers of higher education state that "mobility of students and academic and administrative staff is the basis for establishing a European Higher Education



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Area. Ministers emphasise its importance for academic and cultural as well as political, social and economic spheres, and agree to undertake the necessary steps to improve the quality and coverage of statistical data on student mobility”.

Bearing these factors in mind the team would like to suggest ways in which UVAB can build on the excellent results it has already achieved. More academic programmes in foreign languages would attract students from abroad and add significantly to the university’s international profile. This would require excellent language skills on the part of the teachers involved, and so a system of language training for staff. It would help if foreign students could choose courses across different faculties, a process greatly simplified by the introduction of modularisation. An integrated internationalisation policy as part of the overall strategic plan is needed, incorporating all the diverse activities already mentioned.

#### **The team recommends:**

- 1. The university strategic plan should contain an international university policy involving all university components, based on the work already done, on effective contacts, on scientific priorities, on geographic areas, etc., and to include: targets to be reached concerning the mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff; provision of more foreign language training for staff and students; development of a systematic policy of information to the university community (on European programmes, networks, scholarships, grants, ECTS, Bologna Process, Erasmus, etc.); central collection of all data at all levels on international actions in order to follow their evolution, their results, and use this monitoring (this log-book) to have a clear view of UVAB’s presence in Europe and in the world**
- 2. The university should provide more study programmes in foreign languages, e.g. English and French.**



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## 9. Conclusion

We wish to thank the university once again for its generous hospitality and for the excellent arrangements provided for the evaluation team. It was a pleasure to be in Bacau to discuss with students and staff the future directions of the university. At this time of profound and far-reaching change in higher education in Romania the university is to be congratulated for its frank and open examination of its ability to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Vasile Alecsandri University in Bacau is a good university, well appreciated by its students and stakeholders. It is operating in a challenging environment and this requires considerable self-reflection and effort to better analyse its actual situation, improve its functionality and develop its quality culture. In all our meetings we were struck by the strong determination to see the university achieve its full potential as a driver of regional development and an institution of high national and international standing. We hope that the university finds our comments and suggestions helpful, and we wish the university well for the next stage of its development.

### Summary of recommendations

**Set up a Strategic Planning Committee, chaired by the rector, with the remit of establishing a realistic strategic plan in a prescribed time scale, and the responsibility to monitor its implementation and ongoing updating.**

**Administrative staff should be represented in the Senate.**

**Find a way to give a formal consultative role to external stakeholders, especially in the area of strategic planning.**

**The centre of gravity of the university should move towards the centre.**

**Develop an integrated database.**

**Modularise all courses in the university. For each module information to students should contain**

- 1. precise descriptions of prerequisite modules, and learning outcomes rather than inputs**
- 2. core competences to be fostered**
- 3. the overall aims and purpose of the module, benchmarks for student learning and achievements, clear guidelines on written and project work, principles on assessment and feedback to students.**





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**Make use of the modular course structure to create interdisciplinary study programmes as well as joint degrees both within the university and with other universities in Romania and abroad.**

**Establish a Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) with responsibility for staff development and training, including new and experimental ways of teaching and learning.**

**Activate the alumni association.**

**Redefine the nature of research in the institution and create an overarching strategy to build a research base compatible with the (revised) vision. Clearly define its priorities and establish an ongoing action plan for their implementation.**

**Systematise its collaboration with external partners by:**

- 1. Establishing a forum for regular discussion with local employers.**
- 2. Closer articulation between student training and the needs of employers in the region.**

**Establish new overarching internal quality assurance procedures on the IEP model. Under the direction of the vice-rector for quality assurance, organise and oversee the required operational procedures. Benchmark against good practice and invite external experts to provide training.**

**The strategic plan should contain an international university policy involving all university components, based on the work already done, on effective contacts, on scientific priorities, on geographic areas, etc., and to include: targets to be reached concerning the mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff; provision of more foreign language training for staff and students; development of a systematic policy of information to the university community (on European programmes, networks, scholarships, grants, ECTS, Bologna Process, Erasmus, etc.); central collection of all data at all levels on international actions in order to follow their evolution, their results, and use this monitoring (this log-book) to have a clear view of UVAB's presence in Europe and in the world.**

**The university should provide more study programmes in foreign languages, e.g. English and French.**