

**“ION IONESCU DE LA BRAD” UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES
AND VETERINARY MEDICINE OF IASI (USAMV)**

EVALUATION REPORT

May 2019

Team:

Luc Hittinger, Chair

Marián Dzimko

Jordi Villà-Freixa

Inguna Blese

Karen Willis, Team Coordinator

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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of 'Ion Ionescu De La Brad' University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi (USAMV).

The evaluation took place in 2018-19, with the first visit in February 2019 and the second visit in April 2019.

1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. 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 IEP are:

- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:

- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

All aspects of the evaluation are 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 the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2 USAMV's profile

USAMV originated in the establishment of the Section of Agricultural Sciences at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Iasi in 1912. In 1948, the Agronomic Institute of Iasi was established with the Faculty of Agrotechnics. The two Faculties of Horticulture and of Animal Sciences were then created in 1951, and the further Faculty of Veterinary Science in 1961. These four faculties continue to the present day, providing 16 Bachelor's programmes

encompassing eight areas of study: agronomy, economic engineering and management, food engineering, biology, horticulture, environmental engineering, animal sciences and veterinary medicine. In 2018-19 there were 2 803 full-time Bachelor's students, with a further 407 undertaking distance learning; 821 Master's students across 23 programmes of study; and 188 doctoral candidates over five areas of study undertaking 32 specialisations. (Self-Evaluation Report (SER), pp. 3, 5, 8). USAMV Iasi is one of four similar specialist universities in Romania, each based in a separate region of the country.

USAMV's main campus covers 20 hectares and is located in the northern part of Iasi, in the north-eastern region of Romania. Further extensive land owned by the university, giving a total surface area of 11,571 hectares, contributes to the practical training of students and generates additional revenue. The institution has three production and research farms for practical training, and three other practical training centres (SER, p. 4).

In 2018-19, 499 staff were employed at the university, of which 184 were academic staff consisting of 41 (22%) professors, 35 (19%) associate professors, 64 (35%) lecturers and 44 (24%) assistants. For academic staff, 121 positions out of 184 were occupied, an occupation level of 66%, while across all staff categories the overall level of job occupation was approximately 60% (SER, p. 5 and appendix 2).

USAMV is a state-owned autonomous institution, operating according to the provisions of the Romanian National Education Law no.1/2011 and on the basis of its University Charter. It is subject to the institution and programme accreditation requirements of ARACIS, the national quality assurance body, and the university holds the rating of a "high degree of confidence", the highest judgement that can be awarded. State university education in Romania is free of charge for students, within the number of student places allocated annually by the Ministry of National Education which determine the core state finance allocation (SER, pp. 5-6, 8).

The institution's SER states that its vision is "to be a national leader in education and scientific research in the fields of plant and animal resources engineering, food engineering, engineering and management in agriculture and rural development, environmental engineering and veterinary medicine, and to be among the prestigious European universities of the same domain". Its stated mission "focuses on the scientific research and excellence in education through successful programmes of study at all cycles of study, in order to meet the requirements of an ever-growing society. USAMV aims to generate knowledge through research, development, innovation and technological transfer, to offer high-level professional training, and to attract in the academic activity the best specialists and young people with a high potential for professional and scientific training." USAMV includes in its future strategy the objective of attaining the national category status of "advanced research and education university" (SER pp. 5-6).

1.3 The evaluation process

The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a working group established by the Management Board in July 2018 (SER, p. 3). The group comprised a vice-rector, the vice-deans from all four faculties, and both the Director and Secretary of the International Relations Office. The team heard that the self-evaluation group had aimed to involve all levels of staff in writing the SER and consulted with representatives from all areas featured in report, including academic departments, faculty councils and administrative departments. The SER team's activity had been reported on an ongoing basis to meetings of both the University Management Board and Senate. The team saw no evidence that any students (undergraduate or postgraduate) had been directly involved in the preparation of the report, although we were told that doctoral candidates were aware of the report and the evaluation.

The SER, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in January 2019. The two visits of the evaluation team to USAMV took place from 27 February to 1 March and from 2 to 5 April, respectively. Prior to and during the second visit, USAMV provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.

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

- Professor Luc Hittinger, former President of the Paris Est Créteil University, France, team chair
- Professor Marián Dzimko, former Vice-Rector, Zilina University, Slovakia
- Professor Jordi Villà-Freixa, former Vice-Rector, University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain
- Ms Inguna Blese, student, University of Latvia, Latvia
- Prof Karen Willis, former Dean of Academic Quality and Enhancement, University of Chester, UK, team coordinator

The team is grateful to Rector Professor Vasile Vîntu and his team for their kind hospitality and full engagement in the evaluation process. The team thanks all staff and students whom they met during their visits for their warm welcome to USAMV Iasi and the openness with which they engaged in discussions. Particular thanks are extended to Professor Liviu-Dan Miron, Associate Professor Răzvan-Mihail Radu-Rusu and Ms Larisa-Elena Hîncu, and their colleagues, for preparing all arrangements so efficiently and for their consideration to the team throughout the visits.

2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The management and decision-making structure of USAMV at institutional level consists of the University Senate, the Management Board and the Council for Doctoral Studies. The team heard that deliberative and legislative authority lies with Senate, with faculty representatives democratically elected in proportion to their respective numbers of academic staff. All committees include a minimum of 25% student representation. Neither the rector, vice-rectors nor faculty deans are members of Senate, which meets monthly. Each faculty and academic department has its own council or board. Executive power is led by the rector, chosen every four years by the entire academic community. The rector appoints a vice-rector from each faculty and selects deans from at least two candidates nominated by their faculties; deans then nominate their own vice-deans. The Management Board meets weekly, and comprises the vice-rectors, each with specific responsibilities; the deans; the General Administrative Director; the Director of the Council for Doctoral Studies; and a student representative.

Managers and Senate representatives whom the team met considered all faculties to be fairly represented in decision-making processes. The team heard that plans for new programmes, regulations, finances and projects proposed by faculties and the Management Board must have Senate approval to proceed, in accordance with higher education law. The rector attends Senate by invitation to present proposals, the annual plan and an annual State of the University report. The team was told consistently that the institution's culture and procedures reflect a consultative and bottom-up approach to planning, that no conflict is experienced between the institution's executive and legislative powers and that matters are conducted in a collegial manner. The team found there to be clear roles, structures and responsibilities and a healthy relationship apparent between Senate and academic management. The rector's leadership is clearly recognised and well-supported by his management team. Student representatives are elected democratically, and informal meetings are held regularly with senior staff. Students with whom the team met expressed the view that they are well-represented on faculty boards and Senate. However, the team wondered whether students might potentially be encouraged to develop a more active role in influencing formal decision-making.

The university has a comprehensive institutional strategic plan for 2016-20, as presented by the Management Board and approved by Senate. Faculties devise their own annual operational plans for enacting the strategic plan; these are then aggregated into an overall institutional operational plan, identifying those responsible for overseeing implementation of each objective. The team heard that the operational plan aims to encompass all activities undertaken within the university, organised under the areas of the vice-rectors, but that the document does not prioritise these. The team recognised that the process for assembling the strategic and operational plans is inclusive and collegial, but found that this method had produced lengthy documents with extensive listings of objectives. The team also considered that the compilation from local plans made it less easy to identify opportunities for synergies between faculties and departments from an institutional perspective. The team was interested to learn of the university's processes for identifying its priorities, and therefore requested a prioritisation of the SER SWOT analysis, which was subsequently produced and provided.

From discussion with senior staff, the team's impression was that USAMV would benefit from more systemic articulation of its priorities in order to maximise effective planning, targeting and allocation of its energies and financial resources. The team believes this would strengthen the capacity to respond to external pressures in a competitive environment. The team suggests that this process might benefit from expert facilitation and recommends that USAMV *prepare a "professionally-advised" leaner strategic plan, informed by internal and external stakeholders, for approval by Senate*. Further to this, the team recommends that the *Management Board lead the construction of a prioritised operational plan (with key performance indicators) with the help of all parts of the organisational structure, identifying synergies*.

The vice-rectors each have wide-ranging portfolios, reflected in corresponding committees of the Senate. The team observed that arrangements to oversee these areas are well-organised and that there is good communication with the faculties over institutional activity. However, it seemed to the team that the organisational structures for driving and operationalising strategy might benefit from being more formalised. The team considered that, for the university to prepare itself for the competitive demands of the future, it might be beneficial to explore how best to strengthen support for the vice-rectors in leading the delivery of the objectives of the strategic and operational plans. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *consider reviewing the working teams for enacting each of vice-rectors' areas of responsibility*.

In meetings with some service departments overseen by the vice-rectors, the team was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm shown by staff. The team also noted, however, that several services are academically-led and depend heavily on academics in the faculties, and that the numbers of professional staff in some supporting teams are very small. This places particular pressure on the academics who carry these responsibilities in addition to their teaching loads, and also limits the potential advantages to be gained from specialist expertise dedicated to these areas. The team was told that the Centre for Career Orientation and Guidance benefits from five full-time specialist careers advisers. However, the International Relations Office relies on a very small team, albeit committed and dynamic, and the Department of Research, Innovation and Technology Transfer lacks a team of specialists to scope sources of funding, circulate calls, and support academics in their applications. Since these are strategically important areas for development within the European context, the team recommends that USAMV *consider wider professionalisation of its services*.

The team learned that core public funding is allocated each year according to student numbers, with additional state funding for institutional development awarded through competition based on quality criteria. Although the value to the university of this competitive funding has grown over recent years, the level of government funding as a percentage of overall university income has continuously decreased. Notwithstanding this, the university's overall budget has gradually increased due to supplemental income successfully generated largely through sources such as its land, European project funds, and additional tuition fees. The team learned that the budget is managed and monitored centrally. Each year, Senate approves proposals for part of the budget to be used on new institutional initiatives for the benefit of students, such

as free campus WiFi, modernising practical facilities, and improving the library. The team was told that the university aims to develop all faculties consistently and equitably and that this principle is accepted and supported by staff at all levels. Faculties retain the external funding awarded for their own projects, enabling bonus payments to be made to those researchers generating the funds.

The team recognised the limitations of state funding depending on student numbers and commends the university on maintaining a balanced budget by generating income from other sources, and on the steps taken to enhance the institution for the benefit of students and staff. The team saw impressive evidence of investment in advanced specialist facilities, and the potential that these offer as centres of excellence. The team emphasises the importance of targeted investment to support strategic priorities and recommends that USAMV *continue to scope other possible sources of income and identify priorities for concentrated expenditure.*

The team heard of issues relating to staffing resource. The university's structures for academic staff, the team was told, are in accordance with national standards. Senate considers requests for recruitment to new or replacement posts within the limits of Ministry legislation on the number that may be appointed; currently one recruitment is permitted for every two who leave. All new posts require approval by the Ministry. Academic positions, including senior management staff, all have a required minimum number of teaching hours. Professors holding research grants can sometimes offset a few of their teaching hours, which are taken up by more junior staff doctoral candidates, whose teaching input was deemed by staff in one faculty to be 'essential'. The team heard from some staff that their teaching load was too heavy, but this view was not universal. There is a staff competition for a bonus offered every three years, in which research outputs and teaching activity are both considered.

The team heard that eligible staff are encouraged to progress to more senior posts, which are first offered internally before being opened to external competition. However, some vacancies persist where no suitable candidate can be found, or the post does not offer a full teaching load, perhaps due to a reduction in student numbers reflecting demographic trends. The team noted that in 2017 expenditure on staff salaries was about 44% of the total budget, which seemed quite low. The team was told that the level of occupied posts (66% academic) is within ARACIS requirements, but that the university had nonetheless identified this as a weakness and was keen to enable new academic staff to join the institution. It was explained to the team that, although the law had become less restrictive in 2017, salaries compared unfavourably to those offered by private companies. Faculty staff told the team that they aim to identify and develop those students with an aptitude for research, and that several new posts specifically for competition between doctoral graduates had been approved by Senate. The team commends such initiatives and also encourages the institution to consider what further mechanisms might be available for introducing new staff from wider backgrounds. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *consider the potential to transform unoccupied positions into an opportunity, for example by inviting more high-profile and international visiting and guest lecturers.*

3. Quality culture

The university is subject to the Romanian quality assurance requirements for higher education, as overseen by the national body ARACIS. The most recent institutional evaluation by ARACIS in 2018 had resulted in the most successful accreditation outcome of “high degree of confidence”. The institution had also undergone an IEP evaluation in 2013 as part of a national programme of evaluations, and the team was told that the steps the university had taken following the recommendations from the last IEP report had helped them to progress as an institution. The team heard from senior staff that they viewed evaluation positively and were committed to following recommendations wherever possible to develop the institution further. They had voluntarily commissioned this IEP evaluation to gain an informed external view of their progress in the wider context of the European higher education sector. The team was keen to understand specific aspects of the university which had been developed since the 2013 IEP evaluation, since these had not been explicitly highlighted. The team therefore requested and received a list of changes specifically implemented since the previous evaluation, to enable comparison with the situation in 2013.

Institutionally, the university operates a quality management system for its administrative support departments and systems in accordance with the relevant ISO standards of certification. Additionally, the institution maintains ISO certificated standards in its system for quality assurance of food safety in the public food services provided through its own restaurant-cafeteria.

Senate establishes all internal academic regulations and standards, with reference to the national standards for oversight of academic activity in different departments. According to the SER (p. 17), the central Quality Assurance Department, led by a Director reporting to the Vice-Rector for Education and to the Committee for Quality Evaluation and Assurance, coordinates and supports the consistent implementation of quality assurance policies and procedures as approved by Senate. Each year, the department submits a wide-ranging report to Senate encompassing all aspects of the university’s activity, and including data relating to outcomes of academic quality assurance processes.

A vice-dean and the heads of department in each faculty have responsibility for the enactment of quality assurance processes and each study programme has a coordinator. The team learned that internal quality reports are produced annually for each study programme, which are scrutinised by the faculty-based quality committees. The Senate Committee for Teaching and Research also analyses the outcomes for each programme based on the internal reports, using the same standards and indicators as ARACIS. Additionally, faculty deans prepare annual reports from the quality assurance processes within their faculties; the SER states that “the internal evaluation reports gathered from the faculties are the basis in designing the operational plans and in updating strategic plans” (p. 17). Reports are also submitted to ARACIS, and all programmes are subject to separate ARACIS scrutiny and accreditation every five years.

The team was advised of some issues identified at a visit from the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE), which currently prevent external accreditation of the USAMV's Veterinary programmes with this professional organisation. In particular, some improvement and expansion of facilities was needed in order to gain this accreditation. The team saw evidence that the faculty had produced a full written response addressing each of the issues identified by EAEVE, and heard that Senate had agreed resources to support the faculty in meeting the necessary accreditation requirements. The team noted, however, that this issue had not been identified as an area of weakness in the SER for this evaluation, which states only that USAMV is a member of EAEVE (SER, p. 10). The team also wondered whether the weaknesses highlighted in the external accreditation process had been identified in the course of completing routine internal quality processes, which might have enabled them to have been prioritised and addressed sooner.

Academic staff are evaluated individually through a series of standard student, peer and self-evaluation questionnaires. The team was told that the results of these are discussed by the dean and head of department with each colleague. Staff receive a score and may be deemed eligible for financial reward or promotion, should opportunities arise. If there are ongoing issues with a member of staff, these may be discussed more widely with faculty colleagues or with the rector.

It was clear to the team that USAMV meets ARACIS requirements at highest level, and that, for this to be the case, there is a good, consistent level of compliance with internal academic quality assurance policies and procedures. The team was told that everyone has ownership of these processes and understands quality culture. However, when asked by the team about the effectiveness of the university's evaluation processes in improving and enhancing its academic provision, the responses of staff in various meetings were predominantly limited to outlining the various processes themselves. The team heard that ARACIS standards provide the primary reference points for quality assurance within the university, rather than direct use of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Part 1*.

The team heard in discussions with various groups of staff an acknowledgement that quality assurance processes are undertaken primarily to meet internal and external requirements or thresholds, but saw or heard little evidence of these processes also being used actively to promote enhancement. The team formed the impression therefore that the use of quality assurance appears to be responsive, but passive rather than active. The team suggests that the institution could further develop beyond its current culture of compliance with ARACIS-led requirements by embedding within its own monitoring and review processes routine consideration by all staff of how its provision might be continuously improved. The team noted that the senior management had shown commendable leadership in its commitment to using institutional evaluation as a driver for strategic development and enhancement. The team recommends that USAMV *extend the culture of ownership of evaluation for enhancement purposes more widely throughout the institution by promoting the use of quality assurance at all levels to drive good practice, including in teaching*. In order to consolidate its growing

maturity as an institution and promote ownership of a quality culture based on self-directing enhancement the team therefore recommends that USAMV *undertake and properly use a systematic internal evaluation of its own academic quality assurance and enhancement processes to establish how they might best be used actively for continuous enhancement purposes by staff at all levels.*

There exists a vice-rectorate for student issues and events. When asked about responding to student feedback on their experiences, the team was told by staff that students could raise problems with their faculties, and then the rector, who would raise any major issues with Senate; student members of Senate are able to see all documents and voice their opinions. The university encourages students to talk about different aspects of their activity, and it was felt by staff that students had started to talk more freely about what they thought needed addressing, and to understand that they would not be sanctioned for any negative comments. The team heard that management has a good relationship with the students, aiming to address their issues wherever possible, but still hopes to improve this.

Students met by the team were aware that the students' union could pursue complaints on their behalf, and that management would often do what they could to resolve particular problems; however, students were not always confident of an outcome. Whilst the team heard from some students that they had been unable to obtain a meeting with their dean over a particular issue when requested, others reported a very good relationship with their dean, whom they found friendly and helpful, and whom they could approach to discuss any problems.

Although some teaching staff expressed the view that the system of staff evaluation by students works well, enabling them to improve, the team was also told by various groups of students that module satisfaction questionnaires are not completed by all on a regular basis across all modules, and saw evidence that the response rate is very low in some areas. The team was advised by staff that this might be due to students not being present, perhaps due to practical training, when the questionnaires were administered in class. The university acknowledges this as an area for development in its SER and the team heard from central staff of plans to introduce online evaluations, which it was hoped would facilitate a higher response rate. Whilst the team heard examples from some students of situations where their views had been acted upon, others stated that they generally did not receive any response to their feedback. Whilst recognising the broader sector challenge of raising response rates to such questionnaires, the team recommends that USAMV take steps to *enhance student engagement, ensuring that views are collected and feedback is given on survey outcomes and issues raised, thereby "closing the loop".*

4. Teaching and learning

USAMV provides specialist programmes at Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral levels, with a strong vocational purpose and practical training to prepare students for employment in the region or further afield. The university has a stakeholder council, and provision is strongly shaped by labour market requirements; the team heard that the business environment, particularly agricultural and food industries, had evolved considerably over recent years.

The team was told that the university's own facilities included three farms and three more distant sites, and that it collaborates with commercial farms and companies where students go for practical training. The university has some excellent new facilities on campus, including advanced microproduction units obtained through research grants. The team was told that familiarisation with production unit management helps develop students' entrepreneurial capabilities and undergraduates reported they could often access new or specialist equipment.

The team heard from one faculty of an ambition for their students to have extended practical experience within the curriculum, whilst acknowledging this was a difficult ideal to fulfil. In discussion with students, the team found that most are happy with their practical training although generally they would like to be able to have more time in laboratories, on farms, and particularly on placements. However, experiences vary between courses, and between individual students' aspirations and expectations. Students told the team of some groups too large for individual hands-on practice, and of one area where there had been a very late change of timing and circumstance for their practical requirement. Many employers met by the team took students for short placements or provided practical projects, including some for Master's students or doctoral candidates, and one had received two groups of 40 students for one week placements. Employers understood the demand for more practical training but some reported constraints on longer placements, with much depending on the timing and nature of the experience required. The team was impressed by the strong impact of partners on curricula and practical work and concurred with the strength identified in the SWOT analysis, that "The university provides high performance academic programmes for priority areas of economic development".

The team was informed that students often come from subject specialist high schools, and that many are from rural areas. There are no entrance examinations and applicants admitted are those with the best bacalaureate results. Most programmes begin with a knowledge-base of fundamental sciences, introducing more practical topics in the second or third year. The team heard a view from one faculty that the academic level of incoming first year students was lower than previously because study methods were different in high schools. The team heard that the university aimed to reduce the drop-out rate of about 16% at the end of the first year and had funding for several student support projects. Projects targeted particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with learning difficulties, and included work on developing students' learning skills. All study programmes have a designated first year tutor, available one hour per week and on request. One faculty told the team that extra tuition is given to first year students where needed. The team heard that teaching staff aim to be

available to their students, to get to know them well, and to organise trips and events. It was clear to the team that the students they met are very committed to their areas of study, and that they are strongly supported by staff. Senate has also approved a scheme of scholarships.

Academic staff told the team that those involved in research use this to inform their teaching. The team also heard that some undergraduates have the opportunity to participate in research activity. The team heard that links between faculties are good and that many staff teach their specialisms across faculties, which is efficient for the institution. There are no joint programmes per se and programmes belong administratively to one faculty, but the team was told that professors share their expertise across faculties and that students share laboratories and facilities. However, from discussions with staff and students, the team formed the impression that there was scope to consider more structured interdisciplinarity in programmes and that some students would like more optionality and flexibility. The team recommends that USAMV *explore possibilities for including flexibility and interdisciplinary optionality in the curriculum at all levels, in due course and within the constraints of national and professional regulations.*

Students informed the team that they are assessed through various methods, including presentation and project work, and sometimes in teams. One student expressed a concern over academic misconduct in assessment, which the team was told is not submitted through plagiarism software. Although the team heard of no further issues or concerns in this area, it encourages the university to ensure that its systems and assessment design practices promote academic integrity and remain alert to the risks of potential misconduct.

The team heard that all teaching staff are required by law to have undertaken an initial training course to teach in high school or university. The university's teacher training department delivers this module, according to a national curriculum, and also a course for students intending to teach in compulsory schools. The team saw only limited evidence, though, of a systematic programme of continuous professional development for updating the skills of the university's teaching staff. Students at all levels were generally very satisfied with the quality of teaching on their courses and thought that USAMV Iasi had "the best teachers for their area of knowledge". Staff were said to be open with students, and to teach at their level. However, whereas some teachers apparently used very active approaches, others were reported to be more conservative; some classes were reported to be insufficiently interactive, with teaching methods too didactic and traditional. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *extend teaching innovation and active learning through various means, for example continuous professional development workshops, peer observation and a learning and teaching conference on pedagogy.*

In meetings with students, the team heard examples of how they were actively strengthening communication and sharing of resources within their own programmes. One reported that each year had a Facebook group; another reported "information blockages", and circulated information to other students himself; another had created her own drive and email group to circulate materials requested from staff. Students reported that some teachers allowed laptops in class, whereas others did not. The team heard from central staff of a funded project

underway to modernise learning processes by digitising resources and concluded that progress had been made in developing use of ICT since the 2013 evaluation. The team's view was that this should remain a priority and it therefore recommends that USAMV *develop its use of ICT with students, including through more systematic digitalisation of learning activities and materials.*

The team was told that the university offers some education provision by distance learning, and also some short training and updating courses as requested by employers or local farmers, for example. The team wondered whether there was scope, possibly through use of ICT, to generate additional income by expanding this type of provision and therefore recommends that USAMV *explore the potential for increasing the offer of lifelong learning opportunities.*

The university's Centre for Career Orientation and Guidance provides specialist career advice to students, organises sessions to support their preparation for employment, and coordinates activities to promote student success. The team saw evidence of strong employment outcomes for graduates. Several stakeholders observed to the team that, whilst USAMV graduates arrived with good technical and practical knowledge of their field, they sometimes needed support at first to learn the specifics of their job, and required willingness to learn and persevere. Some students aimed to continue at USAMV; the team was told that competition for a place on a Master's programme depended on performance over each year, with no fees for the set number of funded places.

The team heard from both staff and students of the university's commitment to investing in its infrastructure. The team visited the library, recently modernised and offering access to the Anelis Plus 2020 platform for online publications, and heard that students were very satisfied with the library resources and campus WiFi. However, some indicated that they would welcome more spaces for individual independent study, and would like extended library opening hours throughout the year, not just during examination sessions. The team found that USAMV offers very good facilities, which are continuously being improved.

Students were generally very satisfied with life at the university, socially and in terms of the environment. A new student dormitory with 300 places has been established. Although students told the team that some other dormitories were over-crowded, overall they thought accommodation was satisfactory and very affordable. Cafeteria food, some produced by the university itself, was reported to be of good quality and value. The team heard one student concern about time spent queuing due to people from outside the university using this facility; others, however, reported enough time to eat at lunchtime. Students found their timetables to be well-balanced; although some days were longer than others, they saw advantages to this.

Website information was thought by students to be thorough and accurate; some had gained information from visits by the university to their schools. Students reported that in their first year they had relied on other established students for information and support, but that those not in dormitories could feel more isolated. Students organise clubs and other activities for themselves, sometimes through the students' union or with support from the university.

Overall, students met by the team were very satisfied and would choose to come to USAMV again.

5. Research

The university aims to gain the national status of “advanced research and teaching university”, supported by qualified staff and high quality new infrastructure. The team saw that the university had made good progress in developing research with a view to realising this ambition. There had been successes in recent years in gaining European grants and funding from activities contracted through the Romanian state. Although some European projects had ended in 2017, thereby showing a recent decrease in income from this source, the total numbers of projects and associated income had increased in 2018.

The team saw many excellent facilities with equipment to support specialist research. In particular, the university has recently opened six micro-production units to support work with the food industry, and has a high-standard facility for agriculture in its phytotron. The team was told that, once established by a particular team or researcher, the infrastructure belonged to the university so was in theory accessible to any staff or doctoral candidates, but it was not made clear how such use would be organised or prioritised.

The team heard that the university has targeted its efforts into modernising and building new laboratories and other facilities in order to generate better results in research and to provide a basis for attracting new funding. The team heard that the university allocated some revenue funds for maintenance and infrastructure but was aware that laboratories may not be able to function at same level of capacity without research grants. The aim is to create potentially self-sustaining research centres, which could also attract new research personnel. The team commends this strategy and would emphasise the importance of senior management at faculty and university levels explicitly foregrounding the ambition to become a research university in strategic and operational planning. The team recommends that USAMV *consider creating a specific strategic plan for research, identifying priorities and allocation of resources.*

The central Department of Research and Technology transfer is headed by a Director, who retains a substantial teaching load. The team heard that academic staff generally generate research funding themselves, sourcing their own calls and preparing their own bids, with some central support on contracts or procurement. For a larger scale European project, senior management might establish a priority and identify a particular team. External projects that are co-funded by the university have to be approved by the Vice-Rector for Research and the Management Board. The team was told of an example of a departmental collaboration with European universities and of two national projects on climate change, won through competition and involving research then knowledge transfer to producers in viticulture.

However, it was explained to the team that there was no routine central searching or scoping of calls or coordinated support available to academic staff in preparing applications for external funding. The SER SWOT analysis indicates the university’s awareness that its capacity for technology transfer is limited and the team heard of forthcoming plans to develop this with support from European funding. In the team’s view, the university would benefit from specialist professional staff to identify and circulate information on competitive calls, and to support and

advise academic staff more extensively on the administrative and technical protocols of preparing bids and applications (see also Section 2, *Governance and institutional decision-making*). The team therefore recommends that, in order to facilitate wider involvement of academic staff in research and knowledge transfer, thereby raising the profile and increasing income for the institution, USAMV *establish a professionalised Research and Technology Transfer Office*.

The team learned in its meeting with external partners that the Romanian North-East Development Agency was actively identifying specialist areas of excellence in research and knowledge capacity in regional higher education providers (see also Section 6 *Service to society*). The team saw that Agrofood had been identified as a priority strand for regional development and that USAMV was seen a primary source of knowledge supply in this area. The team heard that the agency had issued calls for proposals, including on applied research, and was also developing pilot programmes to enable universities to negotiate better research contracts and to open laboratories to companies based on a commercial relationship. It was reported to the team that the university was positively involved in this initiative on driving forward technology transfer, and the team strongly recommends that USAMV *maximise the use of its specialist facilities and equipment for excellent research and technology transfer*.

The team heard that each faculty has an accredited research centre, with research laboratories. The team was told that agronomic research is interdisciplinary and that, as a small university, the institution aims to promote collaboration and interdisciplinary research among its staff. Some academic staff reported to the team that they share domains of research with other faculties. The team noted that some academic staff were very research active, with high quality publications. However, they also heard from others who viewed USAMV as a teaching university, with little requirement for research beyond a certain level. The team noted that research remains a limited activity for many staff, partly but not entirely due to heavy teaching loads, and that the SER SWOT analysis acknowledges that research outcomes remain modest. The team formed the impression that, in some areas, research required more active promotion. The team would also encourage wider internal engagement in research collaboration between teams, especially using the new facilities, as well as pursuing opportunities for cooperative activity outside the institution. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *enhance external and internal collaborative research activity*.

There had been an increased number of ISI (International Scientific Indexing) journal publications in some areas and publication activity is a significant institutional criterion in evaluating academic staff. The team heard that the university is attempting to increase its overall number of publications by bringing together staff from subjects that are doing well in in this regard with those who are doing less well. Faculties organise various events for staff to participate in dissemination of research outcomes and exchanges of ideas. The university also incentivises staff by funding participation in one international conference and two national conferences every two years and supports publication costs centrally.

The team heard that senior management was aware that, in order to gain high status as a research institution and compete at a European level, they needed to recruit more highly-qualified research staff. As a small academic community (the smallest of the four agricultural universities), they primarily recruited staff for teaching and to undertake some research. Short-term research funding meant that the best potential applicants could be deterred by the limited contract, and it was found to be difficult to hire young researchers as the best graduates were often attracted to higher-paid employment in industry. The team was told that the university has a strategy to attract more young academics; it had in the past allocated specific funding to support young researchers and hoped to reinstate this. The university was aware that international projects were less constrained by national regulations over salaries, so might be used to attract new talent to the university. The team was told that vacancies were advertised through local and national media, and specialist portals, but that the university was not aware of Euraxess, through which positions available through European project funding could be advertised. The team agrees that recruitment of high quality research staff is central to the university's ambitions and recommends that *USAMV create competitive funds for recruiting and supporting research-oriented staff, and establish proper dissemination of new available positions following European standards (see also Section 7 Internationalisation).*

The team formed the view that USAMV has a clear vision and valuable specialisms which have the potential to make it a powerful driving force as a research university, within its own society and more widely. The team agrees that the institution has excellent facilities and equipment as the basis for this development but needs to be systematically proactive in order to maximise the benefits from investment and impact of research outputs. In the team's view, it is important to ensure that the limited resources are allocated to create more time for research, incentivising by reducing the teaching load of some staff in targeted areas. Indicators, in addition to publications, could also be usefully established. In order to support and inform its research strategy, the team recommends that *USAMV establish a set of protocols for evaluating research activity in order to target resources and increase quality.*

The university has two established doctoral schools, overseen by the Director of the Council for Doctoral Studies. There is a Doctoral School of Veterinary Medicine and a Doctoral School of Engineering Sciences, which encompasses all the domains of agronomy, horticulture, animal sciences, and engineering and management in agriculture and rural development. In 2018-19, there were 188 full- and part-time doctoral candidates undertaking 32 specialisations, with the number of candidates per supervisor limited to eight. The team heard that doctoral candidates are directly involved in funded research projects and also contribute to teaching. It appeared to the team that there were reasonable numbers of doctoral candidates but that these were spread over rather a large number of programmes. Although there is a clear understanding in the university of the research orientation of doctoral programmes, the team perceived they are seen mainly as academic programmes very closely linked to faculty and department structures, thus losing some potential for promoting interdisciplinarity across USAMV. The team recommends that *USAMV consider reviewing the organisation of the doctoral schools by*

trying to concentrate their structure into a smaller number of programmes that encompass an interdisciplinary view.

6. Service to society

The university notes in its SER (p. 4) that the role of agriculture in the Romanian and European economy has been better outlined in recent years through the common agricultural policy, and that society appreciates more greatly the importance of specialists. From meetings with stakeholders and outside partners, the team heard examples of good cooperation with local and regional authorities and organisations, involving relationships with public bodies, farmers, and other employers in the local economic zone. The team learned that many of the specialists employed in these organisations were graduates of the university, some with doctoral degrees, who reported a good knowledge of university facilities and specialisms. Instances were cited of faculties' equipment and staff expertise supporting companies and farms in solving problems, for example by identifying viruses in animals, or conducting soil analysis, although these activities did not necessarily generate large amounts of income. The team saw evidence of an increasing number of contracts with economic agents, though often involving only small grants.

Representatives reported strong relationships with faculties, and regular meetings with the respective deans. Several of those partners with whom the team met had experience of teaching within the faculty, or had colleagues who currently taught or led other sessions with students. Many also provided practical training and placement opportunities for second and third year students. The professionalism of all the academic staff working in the university in building relationships with firms was appreciated; students were found generally to be well-prepared, with good knowledge of specialist technological and agricultural equipment. The team heard of some collaborations with the university in organising short training courses, seminars and workshops but not of any systematic engagement by the institution in lifelong learning provision (see also Section 4 *Teaching and Learning*).

The team formed the view that the university has an extensive and loyal alumni community, organised through informal networks and contacts, and heard that the university has had an alumni association since 2008. The team recommends that USAMV *continue to strengthen the formalisation of networks and activities through the alumni association*.

Stakeholders confirmed to the team that USAMV has an important role in creating and transferring knowledge relevant to the economic life of the area. The team heard that USAMV is represented on a consulting board of all university rectors with the city of Iasi, which discusses investment and other partnership activities. Various projects and events had been developed, both cultural and academic, including an international education festival, and discussions were underway to attract funding for an institute for safety of food products.

The team was told by outside partners that the majority of the population in Iasi live in rural areas and work in agriculture, and the view was shared that the university has the best laboratory and infrastructure in the area for the relevant domains of interest. The team heard that USAMV has a good relationship with the business environment, which appreciates its knowledge of the realities of the labour market; in recent years, agro-tourism had become one specialism of great interest in the area. The team heard of the example of a project targeting

environmental protection and the development of environmentally friendly business to which professors at USAMV had contributed, together with workshops on food safety and consumer food protection to improve the quality of food products. The team heard of partnerships with the university for promoting fairs exhibiting agricultural products and also organising competitions for identifying traditional Romanian food products.

The team concluded that the university has effective links with a good network of employers and provides strong service to the community. The team learned that the university's canteen is open to members of the public, as well as to students and staff, and also that fresh milk is sold from its own premises. The team saw continuing scope for the university to extend its positive activity in the area of public wellbeing, including food safety, and recommends that *USAMV develop a strategy for the active promotion of wellbeing in the community.*

In terms of other activities for society, the team saw in one faculty a film made by its students to promote animal science to prospective university students in high schools. The team found this to be a good example of how the university might further raise awareness and public understanding of science in different sections of the community and recommends that *USAMV continue to widen its science communication activities.*

The team heard and saw evidence of the important role of the North-East Regional Development Agency in coordinating and managing strategic development within the region. The university is a member in the regional strategy group, and also an academic consultative committee which selects projects. The team heard how the agency aims to promote dialogue between regional universities and to identify how best to meet the development needs of the region and its communities through building partnerships (see also Section 5 *Research*). The team also learned that the university is a partner in two specialised clusters (for structural and molecular imaging, and bio-technology respectively), and is the founder of the Regional Cluster for Research, Innovation and Technological Transfer in Agriculture and Food Safety (CITTASA). The team commends these engagements and encourages the university to use such arrangements to access regional structural funds available to promote higher education development in its specialisms. The team recommends that *USAMV develop further clusters with other local universities as forums for influencing and promoting regional development, and gaining benefits.*

7. Internationalisation

The team learned that USAMV had made good progress in internationalisation in recent years and that this continues to be an institutional priority, although it does not have a formal internationalisation strategy. The university aims to develop its international visibility both through increased publications and through more internationalisation at home, for example by inviting staff from partner institutions to teach classes and share their pedagogic experience. The university has had successes in attracting international project and research funding, including through Horizon 2020. The team was told that there is no dedicated institutional budget for internationalisation, but research project funds are used to support staff mobility. Academic staff wanting to join a European network could request funding from university management. According to the SER (p. 10), in 2018-19, 204 foreign students from both EU and non-EU countries were enrolled (191 at Bachelor's level and 13 for Master's programmes), with most coming from the Republic of Moldova. In 2016-17, 32 teaching staff and 54 students benefitted from Erasmus+ outgoing mobility opportunities, while the university received 29 teaching staff and 39 students through the Erasmus+ programme. It was, however, recognised by the institution that more was needed to improve its international performance.

The university has small teams in the International Relations Office and providing administrative support for Erasmus+ mobility, which are recognised by staff and students as highly professional and supportive. The team heard that their role is operational, including supporting international students and exploring new links and collaborations through cooperation agreements. They do not yet run summer schools but regard this as a future project, and belong to networks that could facilitate this. The team commends the strong professionalism of the International Relations Office members and recommends that USAMV *develop the role of the International Relations Office in promoting marketing, for example through implementing summer schools.*

Those staff whom the team met generally expressed awareness of the need for more staff mobility and some reported using Erasmus+ opportunities to develop their careers. The team was told of a number of collaborations with European universities in Germany, Italy and France, some of which were long-standing. The team heard that internationalisation depends heavily on collegiate relationships established between academics. Some staff are members of European professional or subject associations. Academics aim to become recognised internationally, as promotion from lecturer to assistant professor requires three letters of recommendation from contacts in international universities. Although a few faculty staff had gained their doctoral degrees in other countries, most had undertaken their doctoral studies at USAMV. The team met staff who actively encouraged students to go abroad for doctoral and Master's studies.

The team met a number of staff engaged in partnerships with other universities, some on major European projects. The team heard of the bureaucracy involved in writing a good grant proposal and that support with this, especially for young researchers, would be welcomed (see also Section 5 *Research*). The International Office currently offers some assistance with

applications, and the team explored whether closer working between the International Office and the Department of Research, Innovation and Technology Transfer might be beneficial.

The team heard that the challenges in recruiting international staff, or in retaining ambitious Romanian staff, included the lower salaries compared to many other European countries. In the team's view, internationalisation of staff and arrangements with other universities would benefit from becoming more formalised and supported. Staff met by the team were not aware of the Euraxess portal for advertising doctoral and post-doctoral positions. The team considered that the niche areas of excellence provided by the university's new facilities offered a strong basis for attracting highly qualified international staff (see also Section 5 *Research*). One approach would be to develop a road map on how to improve international staff recruitment as part of an accepted process of applying for human resources excellence accreditation, for example through the *Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R)*. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *introduce a human resources strategy with an international perspective*.

The team heard that student numbers on the BSc Veterinary Medicine programme taught in English are increasing each year and that it is hoped to attract more students through promotion at targeted recruitment fairs and through social media. The year coordinator supports these students, all but one of whom are international, and who were reported to be very actively engaged in their studies. The team considered that securing European accreditation of the Veterinary School would further support international recruitment (see also Section 3 *Quality culture*) and recommends that USAMV *fulfil its plan with resources to meet requirements of European accreditation for Veterinary Medicine*.

The team heard that staff involved in the BSc Veterinary Medicine programme taught in English had increased their capabilities in the English language. However, it was highlighted to the team as a weakness that this is the only programme currently taught in English, despite there being interest from some staff in offering further courses, including at Master's level. The team also heard that many incoming Erasmus students could not understand classes taught in Romanian, so teachers create special supplementary programmes in English. The team heard from staff that the additional work in preparing these lessons was not recognised or incentivised and that international aspects did not weigh significantly in the recruitment or evaluation of staff. The team heard that the university did not currently engage in Erasmus Mundus, due to the lack of programmes offered in English, but that this might be considered in the future. The team recommends that USAMV *increase its offer of academic courses taught in English, including doctoral programmes, and further support the development of English capabilities in staff*.

Staff thought the main factors likely to attract international staff, students and researchers to the institution were the university's modern infrastructure, the cost of living, and the tailored curriculum for incoming students. Incoming students are supported through orientation events, including campus tours and linking with established international students, and can access the International Relations Office in case of any problems. Students are also offered

guidance, counselling, and translation support. Additionally, there is an Erasmus students' network for Iasi, in which their students participate.

The team was told that, for a relatively small university, USAMV holds a good number of bilateral agreements. They have inter-institutional agreements and memoranda of cooperation with universities all over the world, including in western, central and eastern parts of Europe, some of which led to exchange activities. Staff met by the team were not aware of the Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (CEEPUS) for mobility opportunities inside Central and Eastern Europe. The team was told by staff that outgoing Erasmus opportunities for students are promoted through faculty notice boards and social media, and that those interested were generally able to find relevant information. Returning students are asked to speak about their experiences and provide testimonies to promote further student mobility.

However, the team noted that the number of USAMV students engaging in mobility seemed low, and that there were variations in awareness of information about opportunities. It was explained to the team that the criteria for selection included the average grade for each level of study, and also language ability, which not all students met. Those selected sometimes found other more attractive opportunities, particularly in practical work, or were more locally and professionally oriented. Additionally, the lack of English language skills was thought by some staff to deter some students, as were concerns about the affordability of studying elsewhere in Europe.

Some students expressed concern about the portability of academic credits gained elsewhere and that their grades might suffer by also being required to undertake USAMV exams on their return. Some were unaware that they could go abroad for an additional year, then return to their own programme where they left it. The team was told by staff that a national scale of converting credits gained in other countries is used to analyse records; credit is accepted where permitted or else added to the student's transcript. In order to support wider awareness and understanding in students of the academic implications of Erasmus+ opportunities, the team recommends USAMV *promote ongoing mobility of students with clearer communication of consistent rules for credit recognition and transfer according to Erasmus rules on ECTS.*

The team found that the institution is active in international cooperation and strongly committed to becoming a more international university in teaching, research and other services. The many links to other institutions are highly beneficial to staff and students and an asset in taking forward international activities and perspectives. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *continue to enhance institutional networking.* In the team's view, there have been positive developments in the use of Erasmus+ and other mobilities, but the university is not engaged in all the formal possibilities currently available for increasing internationalisation. The team therefore recommends that USAMV *continue to explore other opportunities, for example, CEEPUS, Euraxess, Erasmus Mundus and bilateral agreements offering scholarships.*

The team also encourages the university to maximise opportunities for internationalisation at home and recommends that USAMV *make full use of its current assets of international students, invited speakers, researchers, and alumni.*

8. Conclusion

The team found that the USAMV Iasi has a positive attitude, engaging in a continuing process of institutional development since the 2013 IEP evaluation, and concludes that in many areas excellent progress has been made in following the recommendations. The team found the SER to be of good quality and to reflect the university's situation fully and honestly, and that engagement in the evaluation process was well-organised.

USAMV contributes actively to higher education in Romania and in its specialist domains. Whilst recognising that the university offers high performance academic programmes for priority areas of economic development, the team believes that, to sustain and improve its position at national and international level, the university must further develop its many strengths in order to confront the challenges of the present day and the future. In this, USAMV should be confident in its considerable potential as it continues to go forward and evolve in the European context.

Summary of the recommendations

Governance and institutional decision-making

- Prepare a “professionally-advised” leaner strategic plan, informed by internal and external stakeholders, for approval by Senate
- The Management Board lead the construction of a prioritised operational plan (with key performance indicators) with the help of all parts of the organisational structure, identifying synergies.
- Consider reviewing the working teams for enacting each of vice-rectors' areas of responsibility.
- Consider wider professionalisation of its services.
- Continue to scope other possible sources of income and identify priorities for concentrated expenditure.
- Consider the potential to transform unoccupied positions into an opportunity, for example by inviting more high-profile and international visiting and guest lecturers.

Quality culture

- Extend the culture of ownership of evaluation for enhancement purposes more widely throughout the institution by promoting the use of quality assurance at all levels to drive good practice, including in teaching.
- Undertake and properly use a systematic internal evaluation of its own academic quality assurance and enhancement processes to establish how they might best be used actively for continuous enhancement purposes by staff at all levels.
- Enhance student engagement, ensuring that views are collected and feedback is given on survey outcomes and issues raised, thereby “closing the loop”.

Teaching and learning

- Explore possibilities for including flexibility and interdisciplinary optionality in the curriculum at all levels, in due course and within the constraints of national and professional regulations.
- Extend teaching innovation and active learning through various means, for example continuous professional development workshops, peer observation and a learning and teaching conference on pedagogy.
- Develop its use of ICT with students, including through more systematic digitalisation of learning activities and materials.
- Explore the potential for increasing the offer of lifelong learning opportunities.

Research

- Consider creating a specific strategic plan for research, identifying priorities and allocation of resources.
- Establish a professionalised Research and Technology Transfer Office.
- Maximise the use of its specialist facilities and equipment for excellent research and technology transfer.
- Enhance external and internal collaborative research activity.
- Create competitive funds for recruiting and supporting research-oriented staff, and establish proper dissemination of new available positions following European standards.
- Establish a set of protocols for evaluating research activity in order to target resources and increase quality.
- Consider reviewing the organisation of the doctoral schools by trying to concentrate their structure into a smaller number of programmes that encompass an interdisciplinary view.

Service to society

- Continue to strengthen the formalisation of networks and activities through the alumni association.
- Develop a strategy for the active promotion of wellbeing in the community.
- Continue to widen its science communication activities.
- Develop further clusters with other local universities as forums for influencing and promoting regional development, and gaining benefits.

Internationalisation

- Develop the role of the International Relations Office in promoting marketing, for example through implementing summer schools.
- Introduce a human resources strategy with an international perspective.

- Fulfil its plan with resources to meet requirements of European accreditation for Veterinary Medicine.
- Increase its offer of academic courses taught in English, including doctoral programmes, and further support the development of English capabilities in staff.
- Promote ongoing mobility of students with clearer communication of consistent rules for credit recognition and transfer according to Erasmus rules on ECTS.
- Continue to enhance institutional networking.
- Continue to explore other opportunities, for example, CEEPUS, Euraxess, Erasmus Mundus and bilateral agreements offering scholarships.
- Make full use of its current assets of international students, invited speakers, researchers, and alumni.