

Accreditation Agency
in Health and Social Sciences



Expert Report
on the periodical evaluation of
the Bachelor Study Program
“Biology”
at Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad

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1 Introduction

Study programs in Romania require authorization for provisional functioning, as established by Law no. 87 of 2006, which approved Emergency Decree no. 75 of 2005. The Romanian Ministry of National Education is responsible for authorizing provisional functioning of study programs. According to the Law of National Education no. 1 of 2011 (hereinafter “Law of National Education”) Art. 150, Par. 1, the decision of whether to grant authorization is contingent upon the evaluation and subsequent recommendation of the study program by an external quality assurance agency registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

After authorization for provisional functioning has been granted by the Romanian Ministry of National Education, the applicant higher education institution may enroll students in the respective study program. Following the successful graduation of three subsequent cohorts (taking approximately five years for three-year study programs), the higher education institution must submit its application for accreditation. The accreditation procedure is similar to that for authorization for provisional functioning: an external evaluation by an EQAR-listed quality assurance agency takes place on the basis of which the Government decides whether to accredit the study program.

The AHPGS Accreditation Agency was tasked with the periodical evaluation process study programs offered by the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, Romania as a part of the external institutional evaluation. In October 2016, the relevant documents for the evaluation of the study programs were forwarded to the experts in order for them to review the available information, to determine particular strengths and weaknesses, and to identify any open questions regarding the study programs in writing. The on-site visit of the University took place on January 29, 30 and 31, 2017.

The following three study programs were subjects of the periodical evaluation/accreditation procedure:

Doctoral School of Biology:

- “Biomedical Sciences” (Master of Research)

Faculty of Medicine (Department of General Medicine):

- “Balneo-Physio-Kinesiotherapy and Recovery” (Bachelor of Physio-Kinesiotherapy)

Faculty of Medicine (Department of Biology):

- “Biology” (Bachelor of Biology)

The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS nominated the following experts to conduct the on-site visit:

As representatives of academic institutions:

Mr. Alexander Bordan¹

Student at the Albert-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg, Germany; Graduate of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the Albert-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg, Germany; Member of the Student Union Committee for foreign students at the Albert-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg, Germany.

Prof. Dr. Christian Grüneberg

Dean of the Department of Applied Health Sciences, University of Applied Sciences for Health Care Professions in Bochum, Germany; Head of the bachelor study program “Physiotherapy”.

Dr. Rolf Heusser

Director of the National Institute for Cancer Epidemiology and Registration in Zürich, Switzerland; Former Chairman of the European Consortium of Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA).

Prof. Dr. Hans-Jörg Jacobsen

Professor emeritus and former Head of Department of Plant Biotechnology at Leibniz University in Hannover, Germany; President (2001-2004) of the German Association of Biologists (vdbiol); heavily involved in the Bologna transition of the Life Sciences fields in Germany; former Chairman of the German Conference of Biological Faculties (2004-2008); Visiting Professor in the Dept. of Biology at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts (USA).

¹ *The experts shown in italics have participated in the on-site visit of the University.*

Prof. Dr. Gerd Mikus

Professor and Deputy Medical Director of the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacoepidemiology at Ruprecht-Karls-University in Heidelberg, Germany; Deputy of the Ethics Committee of the Baden-Württemberg State Chamber of Physicians, Germany.

Prof. Dr. Mieke Wasner

Professor and Dean of Studies of Physical Therapy at SRH University of Applied Sciences in Heidelberg, Germany.

The proceedings of the **Program Accreditation Process** conform to the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* as well as to Art. 150 and Art. 193 of Romania's *Law no. 1 of National Education, 2011*; the *Quality Evaluation Activities Guide for University Study Programmes and for Higher Education Institutions: Part 1 Study Programmes Accreditation External Evaluation Guide* and the *Methodology for External Evaluation, Standards, Standards of Reference, and List of Performance Indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*.

During the periodical evaluation process, the expert group surveyed the proper implementation of the criteria, standards and performance indicators as specified in the above mentioned legal texts, as well as the compliance of the program with the normative criteria, as stated in the Methodology.

The following **Expert Report** summarizes the results of the on-site visit and the evaluation of the application documents. Since it investigates the fulfilment of the standards and criteria specified in the "Methodology", the structure of the Expert Report follows the logical succession of these criteria, as they are formulated in the document.

The following **Fields of Activity** pertaining to the program and the University were assessed by the expert group with respect to the corresponding criteria

and standards: (A) Institutional capacity, (B) Educational effectiveness, and (C) Quality management.

2 The study program to be periodically evaluated

The bachelor study program “Biology” offered by Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, Romania, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Biology, is a full-time program taught in Romanian with a regular duration of three years/six semesters.

The main objective of the bachelor study program “Biology” is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become a biology teacher, biologist and researcher. A 180 credit points (CP) according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are required to graduate from the program: one CO is equivalent to 25 workload hours. The total workload of the program is 4,500 hours, of which 2,272 hours are contact hours and 2,228 hours are independent study hours (including 80 hours of practical training/internship and 120 hours of Bachelor thesis preparation and writing). However, the University explains that implementation of credit points is based on national legislation and, thus, that the allocation of credit points for workload hours can vary. The experts note that the study program, if authorized, would be in accordance with the national requirements.

The program curriculum consists of 64 modules, of which 39 are obligatory (1,936 hours of fundamental, specialty and complementary courses) and six out of 18 are obligatory (336 hours). Additionally, there are twelve facultative modules that can be freely chosen as an addition to the curriculum and on top of the required 180 credits (644 hours).

Admission requirements of the program include a high school diploma or equivalent. Foreign students also have to provide a language competence certificate in Romanian due to the instruction language of the program. Students are informed about the amount of the tuition fees in advance.

Upon completion of the study program, students are awarded with the academic degree of “Bachelor of Biology” which is issued by the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad on the standardized graduation documents approved by the Romanian Ministry of National Education. Students complete their studies by fulfilling the course requirements, passing their final examinations and successfully composing and defending their thesis.

There are 50 study places annually available in the program. Admission takes place every year, in two admission sessions, before the beginning of the aca-

ademic year. The first cohort of students was admitted to the program in the academic year 2000/2001 underlining 13 graduate promotions (2004-2016).

Currently, a total of 209 graduates have completed their "Biology" studies. Graduates are trained both for a career as biology teacher, biologist and for continuing academic education, i.e. Master and PhD studies.

The University confirms in a formal declaration that the "Quality Evaluation Activities Guide for University Study Programs and for Higher Education Institutions: Part I Study Programs Accreditation External Evaluation Guide" has been respected, i.e. that the "Compulsory Normative Requirements for Study Programs Accreditation" have been followed with regard to:

- the legal organization framework and functioning of the higher education institution as an education providing institution, its mission and objectives;
- the teaching staff;
- the educational process content;
- the students;
- scientific research; and
- the material basis.

After the examination of the application documents and the on-site visit, the experts affirm and appreciate that the national regulations have been heeded and implemented as stated above.

3 Expert Report

In October 2016, the application documents of the University were made available to the expert group for written evaluation. The expert group assessed the program "Biology" based on the Romanian standards and regulations specified under Section 1. They also examined the factual and other program-related aspects described in the documents. The results of this expert review were forwarded to AHPGS in January 2017.

The on-site visit was carried out on January 29, 30 and 31, 2017 according to the previously agreed-upon schedule. The expert group was accompanied by representatives from AHPGS.

In the course of the on-site visit, the experts conducted interviews with University and Faculty management, study program directors, teaching personnel, a group of current University students and a group of graduates.

On the first day of the on-site visit, the experts inspected the learning premises and the facilities available at the University, namely the faculty library, seminar and course rooms, and the department offices.

In the evening following the preliminary meetings and the guided tour of the University, the experts exchanged their first impressions of the study program and of the University in general. They held extensive talks about the application documents and reviewed the results of the written evaluations. As a result of the first day, a number of initial questions had been answered; at the same time, however, new issues and open questions arose. At the end of the evening discussions, the expert group agreed upon the plan for the next day of the on-site visit.

The second day of the on-site visit was dedicated to talks with undergraduate and doctorate students and to the final talks with University representatives.

The following additional documents were made available to the expert group during the on-site visit:

- Correlation of the rector's managerial plan with the strategic plan and the business plan of the University;
- Presentation of the Institute Organizing Doctoral Academic Studies in the University;
- Presentation of the Faculty of Medicine;

- A Letter of Acceptance to become honorary president of the Council of the Institute of Life Science.

A. Institutional Capacity

A.1. Institutional, administrative and management structures

Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad achieved institutional establishment by Law no. 240 of April 20, 2002. In April 2009, the University was certified by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Based on that, it is assured that the University meets the requirements set by the national Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Currently, the University has six faculties: the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Pharmacy, the Faculty of Dentistry, the Faculty of Economic Sciences, Computer Science and Engineering, the Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Physical Education and Sports and the Faculty of Juridical Sciences. The University is also comprised of an Institution Organizing Doctoral Studies (IODS) with two doctoral schools: Doctoral School of Biology and Doctoral School of Medicine. There are 43 bachelor degree programs and 24 master degree programs offered by the University. In total, 5,900 students are enrolled at the University in the academic year 2016/2017, of whom 1,280 are international students.

In addition to the campus in Arad, the University is also located in Sebis, Satu Mare, Baia Mare, Zalau and Marghita. There are branch managers in every study location who ensure the operative management of the branches. The branch manager and the individuals responsible for certain study programs are kept in permanent connection with University, Faculty and Department management bodies in meetings in Arad. The curricula of each study program is consistent across University locations.

During the on-site visit, the expert group assessed the compatibility of the written documentation and the University's mission and objectives.

Based on the information obtained during the on-site visit as well as the information provided in the written documentation, the experts have determined that the main objective of the University is to offer a variety of higher education study programs which meet the needs of the Romanian labor market and which are compatible with national and international standards of education.

The experts highlight the extensive presentation of objectives regarding the study program.

The University strives to contribute to the social and cultural life of the local community. The University has a *Code of academic ethics* and an academic ethics commission. Furthermore, the University strives to apply the best possible quality management mechanisms and to thereby increase the implementation of Romanian educational law in Romania. In addition, the University aims to strengthen its doctoral training system and to promote lifelong learning opportunities and programs.

Another aspect of the University's mission is the sustainment and further intensification of research activities among students, thus, enabling them to contribute to the general advancement of knowledge in their respective fields. The scientific research strategy of the University covers three fundamental aspects namely (1) basic and applied research; (2) development (generating innovative prototype products and services through research); and (3) innovation (implementation of innovative services and products in the socio-economic environment).

The experts point out that, with regard to the study program, facilities for research are provided. Moreover, research and teaching are evaluated by the "Quality Assurance Department". As such, it was ascertained that a working quality assurance system has been developed.

The expert group has been convinced of the University's commitment as an institution towards offering high quality education opportunities. It was agreed that the University and its study programs function within the Romanian legal framework and that the institution promotes academic integrity and freedom among its students. Furthermore, the University regularly monitors its own activities.

In addition to the above-mentioned facts, the experts gave the University's active involvement in the social structures of the region of Arad and other nearby areas a particularly positive assessment, especially with southern Hungary/Szeged. It was emphasized that the stakeholders of the University, particularly the city of Arad, recognize that the University plays an integral and essential role in the development of the whole region. Therefore, the authorities provide the University with a great amount of support and assistance both in their quality as founding members and in their official administrative position.

Internal assessment and audit processes take place in order to monitor the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives. The University has developed a code of ethics, which is communicated to all members of the institution. The experts observed an active collaboration between the administrative and teaching structures, and have also identified a clear division of the hierarchical units and their functions in the University. All members of the University are aware of the strategy of the institution and they actively contribute to the achievement of its goals.

The Department of Biology complies with the general regulations of the whole University and, at the same time, with the regulations applied on the level of the Faculty of Medicine. The experts recognize a clear and well-functioning administrative structure behind the collaborations between the department, faculty and university units.

The University highlights that the study program “Biology” observes the ARACIS standards specific to the field of biology.

With regard to the aspect of internationality, the experts positively highlight the measures already in place by the University in order to pursue its international orientation. The University achieves mobility of its students by means of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

At the moment the University hosts students from 17 countries within and outside of the European Union. Among its Erasmus partners, the University names such institutions as the University of Calabria and the University of Bari in Italy as well as the University of Grenoble in France. Similar mobility opportunities are offered to the teaching staff.

From the experts’ point of view, the University should present its internationalization measures in a more open and distinct manner so that, apart from maintaining its significant role in the region, it could further promote its attractiveness and unique character differentiating it from other higher education institutions.

The experts discern the potential for further development in the strategic alignment of the Faculty and of the University in general.

The experts define the current teaching and research mission of the institution as rational and well-defined. Furthermore, the University pursues clear and achievable objectives, in accordance with the legal norms and the require-

ments of the national qualifications framework. The University mission also contains region-specific elements which are simultaneously relevant for the whole country.

Taking these facts into account, the expert group regards Criterion A.1 as fulfilled.

A.2. Material resources and infrastructure

The University currently has sufficient material and financial resources to offer the bachelor program "Biology". This was verified by the expert group during the on-site visit. The experts had a chance to see the facilities within the University in Arad, such as the department library and lecture halls. The lecture halls and seminar rooms are well-equipped for providing teaching and learning processes.

The University has enough resources, enabling students and teaching personnel to acquire broad experience in academic studies and work. Access to a library of the university and an E-learning platform is available. The expert group encourages the University library to establish partnerships with similar institutions (libraries, publishing houses) both within the country and abroad, in order to provide students and teachers with access to a wider range of databases as well as educational and scientific material.

The Bachelor study program "Biology" is offered for 50 students per year. From the experts' point of view, the resources of the University are currently sufficient with regard to the number of prospective students and the required teaching staff.

For the first semester of the academic year 2015/2016, 17 students applied and all of them were accepted and enrolled.

Taking into account the University's endeavors to enhance its infrastructure and to improve the teaching and learning settings, the expert group considers Criterion A.2 to be fulfilled.

With regard to the aspect of financing, the experts recognize that the University, whose main source of funding is students' tuition fees, is quite restricted in terms of finding new resources. This is caused by the declining number of students in the region, as a result of significant demographic changes in Romania. Therefore, the expert group recommends the development of a fund-

raising system in order to generate external financial support for the students. This system should include local industries, private donors and alumni.

B. Educational Effectiveness

B.1. Content of the study program

The study program "Biology" (Bachelor of Biology) is affiliated to the Faculty of Medicine, Department of Biology. The program's mission, its general and specific learning objectives, its curriculum and its outcome competences were presented to the expert group. The curriculum description specifies the learning results expressed in the form of cognitive, professional and affective results achieved by the end of each course. However, the experts point out that the module descriptions should be more standardized and include the name of the academic teacher in charge. Also the competence-oriented approach should be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. Moreover, module descriptions should disclose a mandatory methodological foundation in research in the curriculum. Therefore, the structured approach to integrate research activities into the curriculum (training of scientific working skills including relevant scientific research methods) should be made clearer.

The study program's aim is to train students to become a biology teacher, biologists and biology researchers. Through the program's theoretical and practical training, the students learn instrumental, interpersonal and systemic skills. Students who are willing to opt for a teaching career can take the extra module "Pedagogical Training" which is mandatory in view of teaching in the postgraduate and academic educational system in Romania.

With regard to the improvement of graduates' employment opportunities, the University emphasizes the importance of such factors as being in compliance with European norms of international recognition, realizing student-centered education, developing cooperation programs with other European countries, enhancing students' and teachers' mobility, and advertising continuous education, i.e. Master and PhD studies.

According to the Occupation Classification in Romania, graduates of the study program "Biology" are qualified as biology teachers, biologists, biology researchers and biology experts. Graduates of the program may also choose to apply for postgraduate master study programs.

In view of accumulating a specialized vocabulary in a language of international use, students must attend English, French, German or Spanish as mandatory modules in the first and second semester. International students have to attend Romanian language courses. Additionally, all students of the Faculty of Medicine have access to subjects of other study programs at the University, including those conducted in English and French.

Alongside the theoretical curriculum for the Bachelor program, students of "Biology" shall attend a practical stage module (total of 80 hours) in the course of their studies. The Department of Biology has cooperations with institutions and laboratories such as: the Company of Water Supply of Arad, the Territorial Inspectorate for Seed and Seeding Material Quality of Arad, the School Inspectorate of the Arad County, the Medical Centre Laser System of Arad, etc.

The practical stage of the Biology students is performed in the University's own facilities: Pavel Covaci University Botanical Garden from Macea, the Ecological Research Center from Socodor, the Eco-Dendrological Research Center from Izoi, Moneasa. Furthermore the students can perform their practical stage in other facilities in the country and abroad: the Fluska Gora Reservation from Novi Sad, the Adriatic Seaside from Serbia and the International Center for Advanced Research "Fluvii, Delte, Mări – Danubis RI" from Murighiol.

With regard to the students' development of social responsibility and personal development in the course of studies, the University points out that it has its own University Ethics Code. The code lays down rules of conduct, ethics and deontology for all members of the academic community of the University.

Looking at the objectives of the program, the expert group noticed that the curriculum misses some content that is European standard. Besides chemistry and mathematics, biology students should have a background in physics in order to understand the physics behind methods involving spectroscopy, radioactivity etc. The experts take note that 75 % of the curriculum are predetermined by national requirements. Nevertheless, the expert group recommends that the "flexible" 25 % of the curriculum should be used by the University to adjust the study program to comparable international programs. Internationally accepted textbooks like the "Campbell" ([http://ebookfiles.org/campbell-biology-9th-edition-pdf-ebook-free-full down-](http://ebookfiles.org/campbell-biology-9th-edition-pdf-ebook-free-full-down)

load/) or the “Purves” (<https://www.amazon.de/Life-Science-Biology-Purves/dp/0716732742>) may help as orientation for organizing a sound undergraduate biology program with an international perspective.

The credit system applied in the study program “Biology” and at the University in general complies with the *Order of the Romanian Ministry of Education no.3617/2005* on the generalized application of the European Credit Transfer System. Nonetheless, the amount of workload (in hours) for one credit point should be regulated and stipulated in an easily accessible way.

In this regard, the experts have also discussed the process for the recognition of externally achieved credit points. The University recognizes credits obtained at other universities if they comply with the regulations on students’ professional activity; the equivalence of credits is evaluated by an internal credit recognition committee that works inside each faculty. From the experts’ point of view, the recognition of credits transferred from other universities (domestic and abroad) should be regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.²

The study program “Biology” contains 180 ECTS credits with additional four credits awarded for the “Physical Education” modules. The curriculum is comprised of 64 modules. The program is offered on a full-time basis only (six semesters/three years). The total workload of the program is 4,500 hours, which is divided into 2,272 contact hours and 2,228 hours of independent work (including 80 hours of practical activity and 120 hours of thesis preparation and writing). For this preparation, the University there is a module “Research Activity for Drafting the Bachelor Thesis” offered. The expert group remarks that the number of credit points awarded for the composition and successful defense of the Bachelor thesis should be raised to reflect the thesis’ importance in the study program and the considerable amount of student

² Relevant excerpts from the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention

- Article 3.3 (5). The responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfill the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment.
- Article 5.1 (1): Each Party shall recognize periods of study completed within the framework of a higher education program in another Party. This recognition shall comprise such periods of study towards the completion of a higher education program in the Party in which recognition is sought, unless substantial differences can be shown between the periods of study completed in another Party and the part of the higher education program which they would replace in the Party in which recognition is sought.

effort and time invested therein. This is a standard practice on the international level.

Due to the high number of modules the workload for students seems to be relatively high. The student workload should be evaluated on a regular basis in order to make sure that students are not overloaded, for example, with examinations. Besides, the implementation of evaluation results to improve the study programs should be clearly documented. The experts also suggest combining smaller modules into larger units in order to reduce the students' workload regarding examinations.

The graduation examination consists of two parts: writing of the Bachelor thesis and passing the Bachelor exam (which consists of two parts: a written test and final presentation of the thesis) according to the *Methodology on the Development of the Bachelor Exam*. Students are given a cumulative grade based on their performance in the two parts of the Bachelor exam.

The type of examination and assessment for each course is based on the expected competences.

For the evaluation of the students' performance in exams, the University applies a 10-point grading system, 1-3 being the lowest grades and 10 being the highest grade. The document *Guidelines for Drafting and Defending the Bachelor Thesis and Master Dissertation* provides students with information on the general schedule and structure of composing and defending a Bachelor thesis.

The minimum passing grade is 5, but the minimum passing average for the final Bachelor examination has to be at least 6 out of 10 on the grading scale. According to the *Regulation on professional activity* it is allowed to have a retake session and a reexamination session with the approval of the Senate. The Bachelor exam can be passed in two examination sessions.

The expert group evaluates that the courses' content and examinations are considered to be feasible and capable of being accomplished within the envisaged period of time. The fundamental structure of the study program is coherent and reasonable, however, with possibilities for improvement in the areas of content (comparability to international programs) and forms of examination and assessment.

The admission procedures in the program are determined by the *Regulations for admission to bachelor, master and doctoral studies* on the University level. Based on that, the experts confirm that the University applies a transparent policy regarding the admission procedure. The admission requirements for the study program "Biology" include a high school diploma or equivalent and for foreign students additionally a language competence certificate in Romanian.

From the experts' point of view, the admission procedure of the program complies with the requirements of the University as well as with national standards. The experts point out that the admission procedure provides equal opportunities to all applicants regardless of gender, origin or social class.

Based on the described conclusions, the expert group considers Criterion B.1 to be partly fulfilled.

The module descriptions should be more standardized. Moreover, the competence-oriented approach should be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. Moreover, module descriptions should disclose a mandatory methodological foundation in research in the curriculum. Additionally, European and international standards should be taken into consideration.

Importantly, the recognition of credits transferred from other universities (domestic and abroad) should be regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

B.2. Learning outcomes

From the experts' point of view, the study program can be successfully classified within the Romanian higher education system.

The knowledge, competencies and abilities gained throughout the study program correspond to the final academic degree to be awarded. The teaching and didactic methods are student-oriented. The main responsibility of each course instructor is to apply student-centered methods of teaching and to create a productive learning environment. Furthermore, course instructors are responsible for the development of students' degree specific as well as general competences, which are specified in the course descriptions provided by the University.

Considering these facts – as observed from the application documents and during the on-site visit – the expert group sees Criterion B.2 as fulfilled.

The University explains that the “Biology” study program has no shared courses with other study programs.

The practical activity, which has been described under Criterion B.1, enables students to adapt to real life circumstances and to directly apply their theoretical knowledge.

The educational concept of the study program is coherent and well-designed. The distribution of direct contact, indirect contact and individual study hours is well-balanced. Within the modules, adequate forms of teaching (e.g. lectures, seminars, practical work, tutorials) are employed.

Regarding student support measures, members of the teaching staff have regular office hours where they can provide academic guidance to individual students. Moreover, there is an internship instructor responsible for the study program.

The discussions with a group of students and graduates revealed an outstanding level of satisfaction with the University on their part as compared to state universities. Among other aspects, they valued the intensive counselling they receive in the program as well as the approachability of the teaching staff. These advantages in academic guidance stem from the open atmosphere and communication ethics within the Faculty, as well as being due to a well-balanced student-teacher ratio. The students of “Biology” also mentioned a high satisfaction with the equipment used for teaching and research in the study program.

Regarding student support measures, members of the teaching staff have regular office hours when they can provide academic guidance to individual students.

The program achieves its learning outcomes also by the availability of various equipment and modern technologies, ranging from blackboards/whiteboards to flipcharts, computers and video projectors, specifically computerized programs for various courses presented as PPT, brainstorming, computer assisted instruction.

Among the reasons for having chosen the “Biology” study program, which were mentioned by the current students during the on-site visit discussion, the experts underline a favorable correspondence between the financially afforda-

bility, the local accessibility and the high quality of teaching and student support.

Between 2008 to 2016, 176 students have graduated. The experts urge the University to encourage its alumni more to pursue postgraduate studies at Vasile Goldis Western University.

Based on the described conclusions, the expert group considers Criterion B.2 to be fulfilled.

B.3. Scientific research activity

In the academic year 2015-2016, the Faculty of Medicine of the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad organized a series of scientific events such as: national and international symposiums and congresses, workshops, debates, round table meetings with interdisciplinary topics, various cultural events and workshops for students which were presented to the expert team on-site.

From the experts' point of view, the University develops and implements short-, mid- and long-term research projects, which include collaborations with international higher education institutions and participation in scientific conferences and workshops. The expert group was able to ascertain that there are currently sufficient financial and material resources for promoting research activity.

In terms of further development opportunities, the experts recommend to promote research among students and the teaching staff, and to create a structured approach to integrate more research activities in the curriculum of the study program. This includes the training of scientific working skills and relevant scientific research methods (e.g. students should develop, present and discuss – even theoretical – research proposals to their academic teachers and fellow students). Moreover, the evaluation of research should be clearly documented.

It should be emphasized that the University has an Institute of Life Sciences. The Institute is accredited by the Academy of Medical Sciences as a medical and biological research unit constituting a part of the research platform of the Academy of Medical Sciences and enables the members of the University to conduct research project on a high scientific level.

Considering these observations, the expert group regards Criterion B.3 as fulfilled.

B.4. Financial activity

The University holds and receives sufficient revenue for running the study program as well as the related activities. The expert group observed the results of the financial activity at the University. The experts determine the annual tuition fees for the program as appropriate.

Criterion B.4 is, thus, regarded as fulfilled.

Nevertheless, as has been mentioned under Criterion A.2, the experts recommend that the University develops a fundraising system in order to be able to maintain a solid financial basis of the institution. The financing of tangible costs is taken from the tuition fees and other education fees, research contracts but also from public and private financing, sponsorship, donations and other legal sources.

The experts point out that the University has heeded the experts' suggestion given on their last visit to integrate the University's strategic considerations into one consistent business plan, where the financing options are clarified.

C. Quality Management

C.1. Quality assurance strategies and procedures

The University has developed a quality assurance system implemented by means of corresponding evaluation procedures. The University presented its quality assurance system in the written documents and also during the discussions of the on-site visit.

The quality assurance system of the University consists of the following units: the Evaluation and Quality Assurance Commission (CEAC), Quality Assurance Commissions from faculties, Vice-rector for Institutional Strategy and Quality Management, and Quality Assurance Department (QAD). The members of the Evaluation and Quality Assurance Commission and of the Quality Assurance Department are approved by the University Senate. The function of the QAD is to monitor the entire teaching activity of the program as well as the conduction of examination sessions. The University has developed a Quality Manual, which defines the objectives and the organizational structure of quality assurance procedures as well as units involved in it. With regard to the trans-

parency of the quality assurance policies and developments, the University annually issues an “Internal evaluation report of the quality of education and research”. After approval by the University Senate, the report is published on the official website of the University at the end of each academic year.

During the visit and the discussions with the responsible people, it became obvious that the University’s quality assurance system involves both teachers and students in the assessment of the teaching process, continuous evaluation of the courses, and monitoring and mentoring of students within the Faculty.

The process of quality assurance can be described as follows: the Quality Assurance Commission from the faculty submits its conclusions regarding the internal audit report, along with the results of peer reviews, to the Faculty Council. At the end of each year, the data for the given period, including evaluations of teaching performance, is gathered and further directed to the Senate to take corrective actions and issue the quality improvement plan.

The University has an internal quality management system. Students take part in the quality management system; they are required to fill out course evaluations and provide feedback on the teaching performance. The results are processed by the Quality Assurance Commission, which then integrates the final recommendation into its report.

Considering the thorough implementation of the quality assurance system and the active participation of all University members in quality assurance procedures, the expert group concludes that Criterion C.1 is fulfilled.

Nevertheless, the experts take note that the IQS of Vasile Goldis University is based on ISO norms and follows a Total-Quality-Management approach. On the longer run, this might be perceived as a disadvantage as it tends to lead to a quite bureaucratic system of internal control and regulation and might reduce flexibility. The experts emphasize the importance of keeping an IQS system as lean as possible to ensure long term acceptance and sustainability.

C.2. Procedures on the periodical initiation, monitoring and revision of the programs and activities carried out

The experts highlight that the quality management is ensured by central and decentral commissions and a quality management department. The commissions act in accordance with the quality assurance strategy of the University.

Moreover, a quality manual is approved by the Senate each study year. Students assess all teaching staff regularly.

The University implements procedures of periodical revision and evaluation of the study program "Biology" by the stakeholders involved. Hence, the teaching staff is required to conduct self-evaluations and peer assessments annually; students evaluate the teaching process every six months.

Based on the information of the written documents and the observations from the on-site visit, the experts conclude that the study program is evaluated by different stakeholders on a regular basis by means of rational and effective methods.

The assessment of the teaching personnel is discussed in detail below, under Criterion C.4.

The University maintains communication with graduate students through the Alumni Association, whose function, among others, is to distribute questionnaires to graduates and, thus, to contribute to the correlation between the objectives of the study program and the needs of the labor market. The professional degree awarded to students at the end of studies corresponds to the set of competences and practical skills taught in the program. Nevertheless, the experts emphasize that European standards are not incorporated enough.

The experts underline that the quality assurance system of the University enables productive application of the obtained teaching and learning evaluation results. This refers to the introduction of necessary corrective measures and better organization of the program courses, as well as the improvement of teaching methods, envisaged in coming academic years.

Considering these facts, the experts conclude that Criterion C.2 is fulfilled.

C.3. Objective and transparent procedures of learning results evaluation

Based on evaluations by students, the teaching process and the learning outcomes undergo a constant optimization process. Additionally, the University has established clear examination rules and a structured process for dealing with exceptional cases. Furthermore, the form of examination is clearly specified for each module.

The evaluation and examination of students' performance is implemented according to the University's *Regulation on the Examination and Grading of Bachelor/Master Students*.

In order to qualify for the final examination of a module, students must have met all subject requirements: attendance, passing the ongoing assessments and practical works. These are presented to the students by the lecture coordinator in the first course lesson. The study program comprises 41 examinations: 34 written, five colloquium and two midterm. According to ARACIS standards, over 50% of the assessment forms must be written exams.

Students' actions in case of appeal and re-examinations are well-defined and described in the regulations of the University. Hence, there are clear procedures established for the above-mentioned examinations and students are informed of these procedures in advance. The main function of examinations conducted in the program is to objectively evaluate students' achievement of the specific learning outcomes.

Taking the above described facts into account, the expert group concludes that Criterion C.3 is fulfilled.

C.4. Periodical evaluation procedures of teaching staff quality

The program "Biology" has 24 teachers. The teachers have the following academic titles: six professors (25%), two associated professors (8.3%), 13 lecturers (54.2%), one research assistant (4.2%) and two assistants (8.3%). 19 of the 24 teachers are tenured.

According to the University's *Contest Methodology for Employment on Academic Positions*, candidates for assistant teacher positions are required to hold a doctoral degree. The experts suggest that the University might consider the doctoral degree as a non-obligatory condition. This would allow the University to increase its chances to find sufficient additional personnel and at the same time facilitate the academic advancement of students who are either in the process of obtaining a doctoral degree or just starting their doctoral studies. Such students could receive a chance to enhance their didactic skills already during their doctoral studies.

Overall, the teaching and academic staff of the University shows a high level of commitment and potential for the execution and further development of the study programs they are responsible for. The expert group came to the con-

clusion that there is a strong corporate identity and positive group dynamics among the university and faculty administrations.

Teachers' performance is evaluated at the University every year. Results of these annual evaluations serve as the basis for promotion proposals.

The selection and employment of teaching staff are based on the principle of public contest; these procedures are regulated by the University's *Contest Methodology for Employment on Academic Positions* as well as by the Romanian legal requirements (Law of National Education no. 1/2011, Government Decision no. 457/2011, Government Decision no. 36/2013, Order no. 6560/2012, Order no. 4204/2013). According to these regulations, teaching and other positions are publicly announced and the University chooses candidates for these positions based on an open and independent contest. These procedures are transparent and available for potential candidates from the academic and work field. By means of such transparent contest regulations, the University seeks to strengthen its competitiveness as well as its national and international visibility.

Based on the written documentation and the observations during the on-site visit, the experts concluded that the professional and academic qualifications, as well as the amount of teaching staff, are appropriate and sufficient for successful implementation of the program submitted for accreditation. The teacher-student ratio is 1 : 1.5 (24 teachers to 36 students).

Based on these facts, the expert group considers Criterion C.4 to be fulfilled.

Regarding the question of continuous education opportunities for the teaching staff, Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad became the first private university in Romania to be attested as an institution implementing doctoral degree studies starting with the year 2005. In 2007, the University obtained the right to offer postgraduate specialty medical training in residency and also training in the second residency. Nonetheless, the experts recommend that more opportunities for didactic continuing education for the teaching staff should be offered and an incentive scheme could respectively be developed.

From the experts' point of view, although the University has already achieved considerable progress in terms of teacher exchange opportunities, there is still some room for improvement. Hereby, the experts particularly underline the

advancement of the internationalization strategy of the University by means of teaching experience exchange with other higher education institutions abroad.

The teaching staff is periodically evaluated by means of both peer and student reviews.

Student evaluations are performed at the end of each semester. They are anonymous, which encourages an objective assessment. The results of the reviews are discussed in the University Senate meetings. Following these meetings, students are informed about the results of the evaluations.

Should any member of the teaching staff receive an unsatisfactory evaluation result, a course of action will be implemented in order to eliminate the existing problems. Hence, the results are carefully monitored and the improvements are continuously observed. If there is no improvement after a maximum of three evaluation periods, the respective member of the teaching staff will be dismissed.

Peer evaluations are also performed regularly. They are based on the criteria of performance and human interaction. These procedures are monitored by the quality assurance unit of the department, in which the assessed person is tenured. Further on, peer evaluation results are analyzed and summarized by the head of the department; afterwards, they are presented to the Faculty Council as part of the quality assurance audit.

C.5. Learning resources accessibility

During the on-site visit, the expert group had an opportunity to see the condition of University study premises and learning resources in Arad. Overall, it was concluded that the University offers appropriate facilities for the execution of its study programs.

Seminar and class rooms used for the education of students are all equipped with modern digital and technical equipment. The "Biology" students have access to three libraries in Arad:

- Central Library (Arghezi Complex): Monday-Friday 09:00-20:00, Saturday 09:00-12:00; exam period: Monday-Saturday 08:00-20:00
- Medical Library ("Vasile Goldis" University Campus): Monday-Friday 09:00-20:00, Saturday 09:00-12:00; exam period: Monday-Saturday 08:00-22:00, Sunday 08:00-18:00

- European Library of Biomedical Sciences: Monday-Friday 12:00-17:00;
exam period: Monday-Saturday 12:00-17:00

The study program "Biology" has a total of 644 electronic titles of which 67 were published between 2011 and 2016. Additionally, the program has a total of 1,589 volumes and ten magazines with a monthly subscription (five national and five international). Furthermore, the University complex in Macea has a book collection which includes specialized papers on the fields of life and medical sciences.

Additionally, students have access to the following databases: web of science (Thomson Reuter), science direct, springerlink, and CEEOL. A cooperation with the ANELIS PLUS (National electronic access to scientific and research literature started in 2016).

The material resources and the library funds are currently sufficient to provide students with an optimal learning environment. Additional facilities, such as Italian, French and German cultural centers, sport complex and a botanical garden are also available for students' personal development. The University encourages students' learning processes by offering resources and opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

Considering these facts, the expert group regards Criterion C.5 as fulfilled.

The University offers various forms of academic supporting and counselling to students, including consultations, tutorials, therapy and mediation services.

The aspect of diversity and students' rights regarding disabilities and chronic illnesses, is regulated by Art. 5 in the "University Code of the Rights and the Obligations of the Students of Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad". The University states that it supports students who come from unfavorable environments, foster homes students with disabilities and chronic illnesses by granting educational and social scholarships to facilitate the payment of tuition fees. Moreover, individual strategies for each particular case are adopted so that the implementation of student-centered learning and teaching respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths.

C.6. Systematically updated database, with regard to the internal quality assurance

The University has an internal quality assurance system, which was also surveyed during the on-site visit. The University has established structures for monitoring and developing the quality assurance concept. Parts of the internal quality assurance system are regular peer and student reviews as well as feedback meetings organized for this purpose. A more detailed description can be found under Criteria C.3 and C.4.

A regular track of the evaluation and review results is maintained by the University, and strategies for the necessary improvement are therefrom designed. A corresponding electronic system and database are also implemented.

The expert group sums up that the quality management information is updated on a regular basis and that results are delivered to relevant target groups.

The expert group considers Criterion C.6 as fulfilled.

In terms of continuous development opportunities, the experts suggest expanding the University's information management in order to enable storage of the large amount of data and the information collected in the course of quality assurance procedures, and then to apply this information in order to take strategic decisions on the institutional level. Thereby, the information management system of the University should facilitate the realization of the institutional strategy in general.

C.7. Transparency of public interest information concerning study programs

The results of quality assurance activities are summarized in a report, which is annually published on the website of the University.

The University promotes its study program through the University's webpage, local printed media, social media outlets and University open days. The information is also available through a printed Student Guide. There is also published information available concerning the compensation regulations for students with disabilities.

The experts acknowledge that the University has started to translate the webpage into English. Nevertheless, the experts recommend that this process needs to be pursued further in order to attract not only Romanian but also international students and teachers.

The experts conclude that the faculty provides sufficient information on qualifications, study programs, diplomas, teaching and research staff, student facilities and any other aspects.

Thus, the expert group considers Criterion C.7 to be fulfilled.

C.8. Functionality of education quality assurance structures, according to the law

During the interviews with the University management, the board of the University and the representative of the units responsible for the quality assurance activities, the expert group was provided with an overview of the quality evaluation mechanisms and institutional structures.

The Quality Management Commission regularly elaborates and reviews all corresponding policies and strategies as well as operational procedures.

The expert group was able to ascertain the validity of the information provided in the application documentation, and its accordance with the legal framework, as stated in the "Methodology". Quality assurance and evaluation is well-developed at the University. Structured processes and an evaluated organization underline the importance of the quality management at the University; the organization strives for continuous improvement. Central and decentral staff is involved in the quality assurance process.

Thus, Criterion C.8 is considered to be fulfilled.

For more details on the structure, functioning and members involved in the Quality assurance procedures at the University see also Criteria A.1, A.2 and C.1.

4 Evaluation summary

The main task of the expert group during the on-site visit and the peer review was to assess the study program and verify its compliance with European and Romanian regulations (*see part 1 Introduction*).

In the view of the expert group, the program "Biology" (Bachelor of Biology) complies with Romanian regulations, as specified in the "Methodology" and the "Law of National Education". Hence, the study program complies with the pertinent Romanian standards, criteria and performance indicators, as well as with all legal normative requirements.

In general terms, the experts give a particularly positive evaluation to the University's active involvement in the social structures of the region of Arad and of other nearby areas. The community-based orientation is maintained as one of the strengths of the University which tries to support the national labor market with qualified graduates. The experts highlight that graduates even seem to have prospects of leading positions in laboratories.

It must be positively highlighted that it became more than obvious during the students' discussion session, that the students' satisfaction level with their studies and the University is near excellent.

The documentation provided by the University and the favorable results of the on-site visit enable the expert group to recommend maintaining the accreditation of the study program "Biology", offered by the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, to the Accreditation Commission of AHPGS.

Given the fact that the program meets all normative requirements and standards listed in the performance indicators determined by the Romanian national quality assurance agency, the expert group also recommends maintaining the accreditation of study program "Biology" by the Romanian Ministry of National Education.

Based on the Expert Report, the Accreditation Commission outlines the following conditions:

- The module descriptions have to become more standardized and include the name of the academic teacher in charge. Also the competence-oriented approach should be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. Moreover, module descriptions should disclose a

mandatory methodological foundation in research in the curriculum. (B.1)

- The recognition of credits transferred from other universities (domestic and abroad) has to become regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. (B.1)

At the same time, the experts attempt to provide constructive feedback and recommendations for further improvement regarding the concept, structure and content of the program, i.e. the implementation of international criteria to enhance its connectivity within the European network and to increase its appeal for international students seeking international exchange and possibilities to study abroad.

The following recommendations are thus proposed for the University's consideration:

A) Institutional Capacity

- The University could present its internationalization measures in a more open and distinct manner so that, apart from maintaining its significant role in the region, the University could further promote its attractiveness and unique character differentiating it from other higher education institutions. (A.1)
- The University library could establish partnerships with similar institutions (libraries, publishing houses) both within the country and abroad, in order to provide students and teachers with access to a wider range of databases as well as learning and scientific material. (A.2)
- The University could develop a fundraising system to generate external financial support for the students. This could include local industries and private persons as well as alumni. (A.2 and B.4)

B) Educational Effectiveness

- The number of credit points awarded for the composition and successful defense of the Bachelor thesis should be raised to reflect the thesis' importance in the study program and the considerable amount of student effort and time invested therein. This is a standard practice on the international level. (B.1)

- The student workload should be evaluated on a regular basis in order to make sure that students are not overloaded, e.g. with examinations. Besides, the implementation of evaluation results to improve the study programs should be clearly documented. The experts also suggest to combine the smaller modules into larger units in order to reduce the student workload regarding examinations. (B.1)
- The University could encourage its alumni more to pursue postgraduate studies at the institution. (B.2)
- The University should promote research among students and the teaching staff and create a structured approach to integrate research activities in the curricula of the study program. This includes the training of scientific working skills and relevant scientific research methods so that the research profile will become evident. Moreover, the evaluation of research should be documented. (B.3)

C) Quality Management

- The University should strive for an Internal Quality System as lean as possible to ensure long term acceptance and sustainability. (C.1)
- There could be more opportunities for didactic continuing education for teachers and an incentive scheme could respectively be developed. (C.4)
- The University should consider the possibility of employing on assistant positions without the mandatory requirement of a doctoral degree. (C.4)
- The advancement of the internationalization strategy of the University by means of teaching experience exchange with other higher education institutions abroad should be further pursued. (C.4)
- The University could expand its information management system so that it will be possible to save the large amount of data and the information collected in the course of quality assurance procedures, and then to apply this information in order to take strategic decisions on the institutional level. (C.6)
- The process of translating the website into English should be pursued further especially regarding information on the study programs. (C.7)

5 Decision of the accreditation commission

Decision of the accreditation commission of the 14 March 2017

The proposed resolution of the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS is based on the University's application, as well as the expert review and the on-site visit described in the Expert Report. Moreover, the Accreditation Commission took into account the response opinion of the University regarding the study program.

The on-site visit of the University took place on 29-31 January 2017 according to the previously agreed schedule.

The accreditation decision is based on the Expert Report. The Expert Report, i.e. the proceedings of the Periodical Evaluation Process conform to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as well as to the Law no. 1 of National Education of Romania, 2011, Art.150, and Art.193; the Quality Evaluation Activities Guide for University Study Programs and for Higher Education Institutions: Part 1 Study Programs Accreditation External Evaluation Guide, and the Methodology for External Evaluation, Standards, Standards of Reference, and List of Performance Indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS discussed the procedural documents and the recommendation of the expert group and the response opinion of the University regarding the Expert Report.

Based on the response opinion of the University, the Accreditation Commission discussed the recommendation of the expert group regarding the condition that the module descriptions have to become more standardized and include the name of the academic teacher in charge. Also the competence-oriented approach should be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. Moreover, module descriptions should disclose a mandatory methodological foundation in research in the curriculum. The University points out that they are operating with their own typology of module descriptions that are in accordance with the national, i.e. Romanian standards. Due to mistakes during translation, the English versions of the module descriptions did not contain the name of the teacher in charge and also the transversal and horizontal competencies acquired by the student, the assessment method and

other specific requirements of the course. To exemplify this, the University has sent a corrected version of a translated module description. Moreover, the University states that from the research point of view, every course includes the above mentioned activities according to the specifics of the course. These activities are conducted in the student scientific meetings. The Accreditation Commission takes note of this explanation and the additional document.

The standard study period for the full-time program "Biology" is three years/six semesters. The study program comprises 64 modules of which 39 are obligatory and six out of 18 are optional, i.e. there is a choice between these modules. Additionally, there are twelve elective modules that can be freely chosen as an addition to the curriculum. The bachelor study program "Biology" is completed with the conferral of the academic degree "Bachelor of Biology".

The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS considers that most Criteria (according to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as well as to the Law no. 1 of National Education of Romania, 2011, Art.150, and Art.193; the Quality Evaluation Activities Guide for University Study Programs and for Higher Education Institutions: Part 1 Study Programs Accreditation External Evaluation Guide, and the Methodology for External Evaluation, Standards, Standards of Reference, and List of Performance Indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) are fulfilled and therefore adopts the following decision:

The study program "Biology" is recommended to maintain and extend the accreditation.

Based on the Expert Report, the Accreditation Commission outlines the following conditions:

- The recognition of credits transferred from other universities (domestic and abroad) has to be regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. (B.1)
- The module descriptions have to be more standardized. Also the competence-oriented approach should have to be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. (B.1)

For further development and enhancement of the study program and the University as a whole, the Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS supports the recommendations articulated in the Expert Report.