

Accreditation Agency
in Health and Social Sciences



Expert Report
on the accreditation of
the Master Study Program
“Biomedical Sciences”
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/accreditation of the study programs offered by the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, Romania as a part of the external institutional evaluation process. 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 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

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

Conference of Biological Faculties (2004-2008); Visiting Professor in the Dept. of Biology at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts (USA).

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, Art. 155 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/accreditation 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

Admission requirements to Master programs in Romania require a Bachelor degree (or equivalent). Master study programs include a range of 60 to 120 ECTS credit points and are 1 to 2 years in duration. By the end of the second cycle of studies students will have gained 300 ECTS credit points.

Master programs may have one of the following main focuses according to Art. 154 (1) of the *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011:

- professional – with an emphasis on professional competencies;
- research – with an emphasis on research activities; in this case, the research undertaken during the master program can be equaled with that undertaken during the first year of a corresponding doctoral program. Research-oriented master programs can be implemented only in the full-time form and only within doctoral schools; or
- teaching – with an emphasis on didactic and teaching activities and strategies; this can be offered only as a full-time study form.

In order to graduate from the course of study, students must compose and successfully defend a Master thesis. Upon graduation, students are awarded a Master's diploma (Diploma de Master, cf. *Law of National Education* no.1 of 2011), as well as a Diploma Supplement in both Romanian and English.

The beginning of the Master study program "Biomedical Sciences" (Master of Research) is planned for the winter semester 2017/2018, pending government approval. The program would be offered by the Doctoral School of Biology of Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, Romania, as a full-time program taught in English with a standard duration of two years (four semesters).

The "Biomedical Sciences" study program is a Master of Research (MRes). The University also offers a Master of Teaching program in "Biomedical Laboratory Analysis". This study program, however, is situated in the Department of Biology within the Faculty of Medicine.

The Master study program "Biomedical Sciences" is geared toward graduates of the Bachelor study fields of biomedical and life sciences: biology, biochemistry, biotechnology, medicine, pharmacy, chemistry etc. 120 credit points (CP) according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) are

required to graduate from the program; one CP is equivalent to 25 workload hours. The total workload of the program would be 3,000 hours, of which 1,152 would be contact hours and 1,848 would be independent study hours. 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 national requirements.

The program curriculum consists of 18 compulsory modules, including composition and defense of the Master thesis.

Admission requirements include a Bachelor degree, B1 or higher English ability according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as certified by an official language test and the passing of a subject-specific test of cell biology and genetics that requires moderate topical knowledge. The amount of required tuition fees will be communicated to students in advance.

Upon completion of the study program, students are awarded with the academic degree of Master of Research 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. Students earn 10 CP for their theses, which count toward the total amount of 120 credits for the whole program. Although it is standard practice in Europe to award 15-30 CP for a Master thesis, the experts note that the study program is in accordance with national requirements and differs accordingly. The experts nonetheless encourage the University to increase the amount of CP awarded for the Master thesis.

There are 25 study places available in the program for each cohort. Admission takes place every year before the beginning of the academic year. The first cohort of students could be admitted to the program in the academic year 2017/2018. Graduates will be trained for both career development and potential further academic work in the form of doctoral studies.

The experts acknowledge that the study program "Biomedical Sciences" meets the ARACIS requirements for academic performance and follows Art.

154 Para. (1)(b) of *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011. The master domain Biology to which this research master is ascribed, is accredited in the Universtiy by Government Decision No. 402/2016.

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 "Biomedical Sciences" 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) with the highest level of trust. 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, and a *Code of Ethics in Scientific Research* and a Scientific Research 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 activity 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 quality assurance system has indeed been developed.

The expert group has been convinced of the University's commitment as an institution toward offering high quality education opportunities. It was asserted 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 in other nearby areas a particularly positive assessment. 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, they provide the University with a great amount of support and assistance.

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 Doctoral School of Biology, where the master program is situated, complies with the general regulations of the whole University. The experts recognize a clear and well-functioning administrative structure behind the collaborations between the department, faculty and university units.

The IODS is a member of the Council for Doctoral Education (CDE) of the European University Association (EUA) and since December 2015 also part of the CEEPUS networks (Central European Exchange Program for University Studies).

With regard to the aspect of internationality, the experts positively highlight the measures already out 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 Doctoral School 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 requirements 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 Master program “Biomedical Sciences”. This was verified by the expert group during the on-site visit. The experts had the chance to see the facilities within the University, such as the lecture halls. The lecture halls and seminar rooms are well-equipped for teaching and learning processes.

The University has extensive 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 possible. 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 study program in question is an English-taught program offered for 25 students per cohort. From the experts’ point of view, the resources of the University are sufficient with regard to the number of prospective students and the required teaching staff.

Taking into account the University’s endeavor 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 fundraising 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 “Biomedical Sciences” (Master of Research) is affiliated with the Doctoral School of Biology, Field of Biology. The courses, however, are carried out in the Institute of Life Sciences which has the research infrastructure for the practical activities set in the curriculum. The Institute was established by Senate Decision no. 81/2008 and accredited by the Academy of Medical Sciences. The Institute is structured into three departments, namely “Experimental and Applied Biology”, “Biotechnologies” and “Ecology/Ecotoxicology and Environment Protection”.

The study program’s mission, general and specific learning objectives, curriculum and outcome competences were presented in a clear and transparent manner. The course descriptions specify 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. Also, the competence-oriented approach should be made clearly visible in the description of the module contents. Furthermore, the experts also recommend reviewing the amount of credit points awarded for the different courses and comparing them to similar international programs; this also applies to the thesis.

According to the University, the study program “Biomedical Sciences” provides several employment opportunities, for instance as a researcher or assistant researcher in the field of biology, biochemistry or genetic engineering.

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.

The University considerably designed the "Biomedical Sciences" study program after noticing a lack of scientific research skills among PhD candidates. Therefore, some of the main incentives to develop this study program were to minimize this perceived knowledge gap, to teach students scientific research skills required in PhD programs and, thus, to raise the quality of the University's doctoral studies.

Alongside the theoretical curriculum, students of "Biomedical Sciences" shall attend an "Experimental Research" module in each of the four semesters. Each of the research modules of the first three semesters consists of 60 hours (6 CP) per semester. The research module of the fourth semester consists of 200 hours (20 CP). The modules are mainly conducted in the University's internal research facilities – most frequently in those of the Institute of Life Sciences, but also in the biomedical research centers and clinics.

With regard to the development of social responsibility, students must attend the module "Research Ethics in Biomedical Sciences" where they acquire ethical principles related to biomedical sciences aspects.

The objectives of the program are considered to be reasonable and appropriate with regard to the structure and content of the curriculum.

The credit system applied in the study program "Biomedical Sciences" 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 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 Art. 3.3 (5) and Art. 5.1 (1).²

The study program “Biomedical Sciences” (Master of Research) contains 120 ECTS credits. The Master thesis preparation and defense is awarded with ten credit points, included in this total. The curriculum is comprised of 18 modules. Included in these is a module entitled “How to Write a Scientific Paper” (6 CP) in order to prepare students for their Master thesis. The study program is designed on a full-time basis only (four semesters/two years). The total workload of the program is 3,000 hours, which is divided into 1,152 contact hours (336 hours of courses, 84 hours of seminars, 252 hours of laboratory; 380 hours of experimental research; 100 hours of thesis) and 1,848 hours of individual work.

In terms of the potential student workload, the experts recommend evaluating the workload on a regular basis and using the evaluation results to make possible improvements to the study program. The evaluation results should be clearly documented.

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

For the evaluation of students’ performance in the exams, the University applies a 10-point grading system, 4 being the lowest grade 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 Master thesis, which are to be written and defended in English.

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.

The minimum passing grade is 5, but the minimum passing average for the final examination, which encompasses the thesis composition and defense is 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 Master exam can be passed in two examination sessions.

The expert group evaluates the fundamental structure of the study program to be coherent and reasonable. The course content and examinations are considered to be feasible and capable of being accomplished within the envisaged period of time.

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 study program's admission requirements include a Bachelor degree, B1 or higher English ability according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as certified by an official language test, and the passing of a subject-specific test of cell biology and genetics that requires moderate topical knowledge.

From the expert's 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.

However, the module descriptions should be more standardized. Moreover, the competence-oriented approach should be clearly visible in the description of the module contents.

Furthermore, the recognition of credits transferred from other universities (domestic and abroad) should be regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, thus highlighting a competence and consequently outcome-oriented rather than content-oriented approach.

In regards to the admission procedure, the expert group also recommends reviewing the language requirement of level B1 and possibly adjusting it to B2 according to CEFRL, in order for students to be able to successfully study and conduct research in English.

B.2. Learning outcomes

From the expert's point of view, the study program can be successfully classified within the Romanian higher education system. The final qualification responds to the research skills required in PhD programs. The knowledge, competencies and abilities potentially gained throughout the study program correspond to the final academic degree to be awarded. The teaching and didactic methods are student-oriented.

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

According to the University, 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.

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) would be employed.

The discussions with a group of bachelor and PhD students revealed an outstanding level of satisfaction with the University on their part. Among other aspects, they valued the intensive counselling they receive in the programs as well as the approachability of the teaching staff particularly highly. These advantages in academic guidance stem from the open atmosphere and communication ethics within the University, as well as due to a well-balanced student-teacher ratio. Furthermore, in regard to the "Biomedical Sciences" study program, the PhD students expressed that they consider the study program as very positive and beneficial for students who aim at starting a PhD after their master studies.

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 thanks to the use of various equipment and modern technologies owned by the University, ranging from blackboard/whiteboard to flipchart and video projectors.

Among the reasons for having chosen a study program offered by “Vasile Goldis” Western University of Arad mentioned by current students during the on-site visit discussion, the experts underline a favorable correspondence between the financial affordability, the local accessibility and the high quality of teaching and student support.

The University’s aim is to encourage its alumni to pursue further studies at the institution. The University’s Doctoral School of Medicine and Doctoral School of Biology offer a possibility to continue with doctoral studies after the completion of the master in “Biomedical Sciences”.

The University also supports students’ participation in international conferences and workshops, as well as publications in national and international journals.

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

B.3. Scientific research activity

In 2008-2016, the University has implemented over 100 projects and organized 250 scientific events (i.e. conferences, symposiums, workshops and round tables) with national and international participation.

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.

The expert group found that the documentation provided evidence of an obvious general commitment to high-level research.

It should be emphasized that the University's "Institute of Life Sciences" enables the members of the University to conduct research projects on a high scientific level. The Institute is accredited by the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences as a medical research unit constituting a part of the research platform of the Academy of Medical Sciences. Students of "Biomedical Sciences" would be able to conduct their experimental work for their thesis within the Institute.

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 therefore 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 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 in a transparent manner.

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 transparency 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 whole University including the Doctoral School of Biology.

The process of quality assurance can be described as follows: the Doctoral School Council submits its conclusions regarding the internal audit report, along with the results of the peer reviews, to the Council of Doctoral Academic Studies (CDAS). At the end of each year, all 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 fulfill course evaluations and provide feedback to the teaching performance. The results are processed by the Quality Assurance Commission, who 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 Internal Quality System (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 disad-

vantage 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.

The University would request periodical revisions and evaluations of the stakeholders involved in the “Biomedical Sciences” study program. Hence, the teaching staff would be required to conduct self-evaluations and peer assessments annually; students would evaluate teaching every semester.

Based on the information of the written documents and the observations from the on-site visit, the experts conclude that the study program would be 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. Its function, among others, is to distribute questionnaires to graduates and, thus, to contribute to the correlation between the objectives of the study programs and the needs of the labor market. The experts recommend that this practice should also be applied thoroughly to the “Biomedical Sciences” master program in order to adjust the program’s curriculum to possible labor market requirements.

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 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 already 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 of educational theoretical and practical activities and passing all evaluations with a minimum grade of 5 in a grading system from 1 to 10. These are presented to the students by the lecture coordinator in the first course lesson. The program "Biomedical Sciences" includes 18 examinations: 14 written and 4 oral. According to ARACIS standards, over 50% of the assessment forms must be exams.

In regard to the grading of the master thesis, it is planned that the thesis supervisor evaluates the thesis, gives a recommendation and sends it to a commission consisting of three faculty members. The commission then considers the recommendation and decides on the final grade.

Students' actions in case of appeal and re-examinations are 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.

From the experts' point of view, the credit points awarded for writing the thesis constitute an important part of an academic study process and require a considerable amount of effort and time investment from students. This input should therefore be reflected appropriately in the amount of CP awarded for

the thesis. 15 to 30 CP are generally awarded for a master thesis on the European level.

C.4. Periodical evaluation procedures of teaching staff quality

The “Biomedical Research” program is provided with nine teachers. The full-time lecturers have the following academic titles: seven professors and two associated professors. The teaching language in the study program is English. The University, therefore, requires their teaching staff to have an English language level of at least B2 or equivalent. Again, the expert group recommends reviewing the language requirement of level B2 and possibly adjusting it to C1 according to the CEFRL.

Overall, the teaching and academic staff of the University shows a high level of commitment and potential for the execution, as well as further development of the study programs they would be responsible for. The expert group came to the conclusion 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.

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.

The teaching staff is periodically evaluated by means of both peer and student reviews. The results of the reviews are discussed in the University Senate meetings. Following these meetings, students are informed about the results of the evaluations.

Teaching staff evaluations by the students are performed each semester. 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.

According to the University's *Contest Methodology for Employment on Academic Positions*, candidates for assistant teacher positions are required to be enrolled to doctoral academic studies. 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, to facilitate the academic advancement of students who are either in the process of obtaining a doctoral degree or about to start their doctoral studies. Such students could receive a chance to enhance their didactic skills during their doctoral studies.

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.

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. Overall, it was concluded that the University offers appropriate facilities in sufficient number and quality for the execution of the study program "Biomedical Sciences".

Seminar and class rooms that would be used for the seminars are all provided with modern digital and technical equipment. Additionally, the students would have access to the "Tudor Arghezi" Central Library which offers a book collection of around 510,000 volumes of almost 100,000 titles. The opening hours are Monday to Friday 09:00-20:00 and Saturday 09:00-12:00. During the exam period the opening hours are Monday to Saturday 08:00-22:00 and Sunday 08:00-18:00.

The material resources and the library funds are sufficient to provide students with an optimal learning environment. Additional facilities, such as Italian, French and German cultural centers, sport complex, a botanical garden and others 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 home students with disabilities and chronic illnesses by granting educational and social scholarships to facilitate on the payment of tuition fees. Moreover, individual strategies for each particular case are adopt-

ed 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 therefrom are 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 system in order to enable storage of the large amount of data and 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 programs through the University's webpage, local printed media, radio spots, social media outlets and University open days. The information is also available through a printed Student Guide. There is also published information concerning the compensation regulations for students with disabilities.

The experts acknowledged 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. This would be especially beneficial for the English-taught study programs, for example the master program “Biomedical Sciences”.

The experts conclude that the University 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 as well as the students, 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 “Biomedical Sciences” (Master of Research) successfully complies with Romanian regulations, as specified in the “Methodology” and in 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.

The experts give a particularly positive evaluation to the University’s plans to offer a research master program in “Biomedical Sciences” given the fact that the University has identified a possible need for such a program, i.e. further education and preparation of its students in order to succeed in a PhD program.

The documentation provided by the University and the favorable results of the on-site visit enable the expert group to recommend the accreditation of the study program “Biomedical Sciences”, 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 the accreditation of the study program “Biomedical Sciences” by the Romanian Ministry of National Education, based on the Government Decision No. 402/2016, regarding the accreditation of the master domain Biology in the Vasile Goldis Western University, to which this research master is ascribed.

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 become regulated according to the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. (B.1)

- The module descriptions have to become more standardized. Also the competence-oriented approach should have to be clearly visible in the description of the module contents. (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:

- Furthermore, the experts also recommend reviewing the credit points awarded for the different courses and also the thesis and compare them to similar international programs. (B.1)
- The student workload should be evaluated on a regular basis. Besides, the implementation of evaluation results to improve the study programs should be clearly documented. (B.1)

- In regards to the admission procedure, the language requirement of B1 should be adjusted to B2 according to the common European framework of reference for languages. (B.1)
- 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, B.4)

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)
- The University should try to get regular feedback from possible future graduates and the career path in order to adjust the program's curriculum to possible labor market requirements. (C.2)
- The number of credit points awarded for composition and successful defense of the Master 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. (C.3)
- The language requirement of level B2 for teachers should be adjusted to C1 according to the CEFRL. (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 should 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 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 Program Periodical Evaluation Process/the Accreditation 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, Art. 155 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.

The standard study period for the full-time program "Biomedical Sciences" is two years/four semesters. The study program comprises 18 modules. The master study program "Biomedical Sciences" is completed with the conferral of the academic degree "Master of Research". The beginning of the master study program "Biomedical Sciences" (Master of Research) is planned for winter semester 2017/2018 if the program is included in a government decision. The master program will be taught in English.

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, Art. 155 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 “Biomedical Sciences” is recommended for accreditation by the Romanian Ministry of National Education.

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

- 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)
- 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)

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.