

Accreditation Agency  
in Health and Social Sciences



# Expert Report

**External Institutional Evaluation  
of the Doctoral School of Biology of the Vasile Goldis Western University  
of Arad, Romania**

AHPGS Akkreditierung gGmbH  
Sedanstr. 22  
79098 Freiburg  
Germany  
Phone: +49 761 2 08 53 30  
Email: [ahpgs@ahpgs.de](mailto:ahpgs@ahpgs.de)

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# 1 Introduction

## Information about the AHPGS and External Institutional Evaluation

The **Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS)** is an interdisciplinary, multi-professional organization, whose mission is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the current European and international contexts. It focuses on the fields of health and social sciences as well as such related spheres of knowledge as medical care or nursing. By implementing quality assurance procedures, it aims to share and promote values and good practices.

In an effort to guide and encourage institutional autonomy, the AHPGS performs and implements external quality assurance procedures at higher education institutions in Germany and abroad. Peer review and agreement on a common set of guidelines is the key to ensuring a qualitative standard in higher education. The goal of external quality assurance procedures is to provide a framework for the joint understanding of these guidelines as well as to verify compliance with national and international standards.

The AHPGS is a member of the following international associations and networks: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The AHPGS is also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). As an organization, the AHPGS is an independent body.

The **External Institutional Evaluation Process** is carried out in the following steps: the Doctoral School submits its self-evaluation report which clearly and explicitly formulates the Doctoral School's strategy and objectives as well as its quality management system and educational activities. The Doctoral School gives an overview of its resources, facilities and responsibilities. Additional documentation and annexes are also submitted. The AHPGS reviews the presented documentation and its compliance with the Doctoral School's strategies and objectives. The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS nominates the Evaluation Panel for a peer review. The complete documentation submitted by the Doctoral School is forwarded to the expert group. The on-site visit

of the expert group and the AHPGS takes place at the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad. During the on-site visit, the consistency of the submitted documentation is verified. Additional aspects, which might not be covered by the written documentation, are also reviewed. Following the visit, an *Expert Report* is produced; it sums up the key aspects and preliminary outcomes of the visit and the reviewed documents. The University can comment on the *Expert Report*.

The External Institutional Evaluation focuses on the following five main **Assessment Areas**:

- A. Profile, Objectives and Strategy of the Institution
- B. Quality Assurance and Quality Management System
- C. Institutional Management and Administration
- D. Educational Activities, including Study Programs
- E. Infrastructure and Functional Resources

The evaluation procedure is based on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as well as on the *Law no. 1 of National Education* of Romania, 2011, Art.158, and Art.193 as well as on Government Resolution no. 681/2011 *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*.

The *Expert Report* summarizes the results of the on-site visit and the evaluation of the self-evaluation report. Its structure corresponds to these assessment areas.

The External Institutional Evaluation is envisaged to serve as an orientation framework that reveals the opportunities for further development from authorized experts' point of view to the educational institution being reviewed. The External Institutional Evaluation is an enhancement-oriented procedure. No formal consequences can be derived.

## **The Romanian Higher Education System**

In Romania education is regulated under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education. The legal framework is covered in the *Law of National*

*Education* no. 1 from 2011. Education at all levels takes place predominantly in public institutions. The state ensures free education at all levels (from early education to higher education). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Romania are organized as universities, academies, institutes or colleges. These can be state-owned, private or sectarian. State-owned institutions usually provide tuition-free education; they also have a number of study places for which tuition fees are foreseen. Private-owned institutions generally provide study places, for which a tuition fee is set.

In 1999, Romania became a signatory to the Bologna Declaration and a member of the European Higher Education Area. Accordingly, it began implementing the Bologna process in 2005-2006. Since then the higher education system in Romania has been restructured in three cycles: Bachelor studies (1st cycle), Master studies (2nd cycle) and Doctoral studies (3rd cycle). Study programs can be organized as full-time, part-time or distance learning programs.

#### **1.) First cycle of studies: Bachelor studies**

Bachelor study programs cover 180 (three years) to 240 (four years) ECTS credit points. Bachelor programs in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy may expand over four years. In order to be granted access to higher education, potential graduates must hold a Baccalaureate diploma ('Diploma de Bacalaureat', cf. *Law of National Education* no.1 from 2011), which is the school-leaving (Lyceum) final examination certificate.

The Romanian Ministry of National Education formulates annually a general framework which regulates the admission requirements. In addition to this, each HEI can set further requirements for admission (admission examination or interview, minimum pass grade for the Baccalaureate, specific subjects as part of the high-school curriculum). These additional requirements are set by the University Senate.

Alongside the theoretical curriculum for a Bachelor program, an internship focusing on practical training is also mandatory during the course of study.

A final degree examination is also foreseen. Upon graduation, students are awarded a Bachelor graduation diploma (Diploma de Licenta, cf. *Law of Na-*

*tional Education* no.1 from 2011), as well as a Diploma Supplement, composed in both Romanian and English.

Upon graduating from a Bachelor program, students may either take up employment, or enroll in a Master course of study (2nd cycle of studies) or in a postgraduate program. Postgraduate programs are intended to provide continuous professional training. These can be organized in accredited institutions that offer study programs at Bachelor level.

## **2.) Second cycle of studies: Master studies**

Admission requirements to Master programs require that potential candidates hold a Bachelor or equivalent degree. Master study programs cover a range of 60 to 120 ECTS credit points and have a duration of one to two years.

Master programs may have one of the following main focuses according to article 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 only be implemented in the full-time form and only within doctoral schools;
- 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 defend a Master thesis. Upon graduation, students are awarded a Master graduation diploma (Diploma de Master, cf. *Law of National Education* no.1/2011), as well as a Diploma Supplement, comprised in both Romanian and English.

At the end of the 2nd cycle of studies a student has gained 300 ECTS credit points.

## **3.) Third cycle of studies: Doctoral studies**

The 3rd cycle of studies consists of doctoral studies. It takes place based on a *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*, approved by government decision (no.

681/2011). The organization of doctoral education in Romania is regulated in the *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011, Art. 158-170. Doctoral studies are organized within specific departments at HEIs – the Doctoral Schools. In order to be admitted to a Doctoral School, a potential candidate must have successfully graduated a Master or equivalent study program. According to article 140 (4) of the *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011, doctoral studies are mainly offered as full-time programs. Doctoral programs may have one of the following focuses:

- scientific – with an emphasis on developing field-relevant research and is a pre- condition for undertaking further professional work in higher education in Romania;
- professional – with an emphasis on the arts and sports fields and aim at producing original applicative and reflective contributions in the respective fields.

This cycle “has as a final goal the development of human resource that is competent in performing the scientific research, able for insertion on the highly-qualified labour market” according to art.4 of the *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*.

The successful graduation from a Doctoral School concludes with a public defense of the thesis in front of a specialized commission. Following this, the commission forwards a proposal for awarding the Doctor title to the candidate by the National Council for the Attestation of Academic Titles, University Diplomas and Academic Certificates.

After being conferred the Doctor title, graduates may enroll in postdoctoral programs.

### **General Information on the University and the Doctoral School of Biology**

Vasile Goldis Western University (VGWU) is a private university (a legal entity of private law and public utility) founded in 1990 and accredited by the Romanian Law no. 240/2002.

The University has the following six faculties: the Faculty of Juridical Sciences; the Faculty of Economics, Computer Sciences and Engineering; the Faculty

of Medicine; the Faculty of Pharmacy; the Faculty of Dentistry; the Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities, Physical Education and Sports.

VGWU currently offers 43 Bachelor programs, 24 Master degree programs and two doctoral schools: Biology and Medicine. In addition to the institution in Arad, study programs are offered on campuses in the cities of Sebis, Satu Mare, Baia Mare, Zalau and Marghita. There are branch managers at every study location to ensure the operative management of the branches. The branch manager and the person responsible for a program are in permanent connection with the University, Faculty and Department management bodies participating in the managing meeting in Arad. The curricula of the study programs are consistent from location to location.

The University acquired the status of an Institution Organizing Doctoral Studies (IODS) by order of the Minister of Education and Research no. 4811/2005. The status of IODS is awarded to institutions organizing at least one accredited or temporarily authorized doctoral school, as stipulated by *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011 and by the *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*.

The IODS has established the Doctoral School of Biology by the order of the Minister of Education, Research and Innovation no. 5199/2009. The IODS also heads the second doctoral school of the University, the Doctoral School of Medicine.

At the level of each Doctorate Organizing School, the Doctorate Organizing School Council operates in compliance with the *Law of National Education* of Romania no.1/2011 and of the Code of University PhD studies no. 681/2011. The Doctoral School of Biology is headed by the Director and the Council of the Doctoral School. The Council of the Doctoral School has five members: the Director of the Doctoral School, two doctoral supervisors of the Doctoral School, one doctoral student and one member not affiliated with the Doctoral School (a scientist with significant international recognition and/or an individual from relevant industrial and socio-economic sectors). According to Art.14 (6) of the *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*, the mandate of the doctoral school council is for five years.

Institution	Executive management	Legislative power
The University:	Rector (part of the board of	Senate



<p>institution forming the institution organizing doctoral academic studies: IODS</p>	<p>directors)</p>	
<p><b>IODS:</b> offering doctoral studies and providing institutional, administrative and logistic support to the subordinated doctoral school</p>	<p>Vice-rector (director of the CDAS)</p>	<p>CDAS: Council for Doctoral Academic Studies; 7-17 members: 1 elected by the PhD supervisors, 1 elected by PhD candidates, 50% appointed by management of the IODS; mandate is four years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- establishing the IODS strategy</li> <li>- selecting PhD supervisors</li> <li>- approving decisions on the establishment and termination of doctoral schools within the IODS</li> <li>- developing minimum criteria on the organization and conduct of doctoral studies</li> <li>- establishing minimum criteria for the completion, evaluation and leverage of results of doctoral study programs, including doctoral theses</li> </ul>
<p><b>Doctoral school:</b> functions within IODS; evaluated every five years; comprises at least 3 PhD supervisors; a PhD supervisor simultaneously</p>	<p>Director / department director (appointed by the CDAS)</p>	<p>Council of the doctoral school / the department: consists of the director of the doctoral school, 2 PhD supervisors, 1 PhD candidates as well as 1</p>

<p>guides a max. of 8 PhD candidates; a PhD supervisors is evaluated every five years</p>		<p>member external to the Doctoral School selected among the scientific personalities; mandate five years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- enrolling PhD candidates</li> <li>- issuing regulations of the doctoral school</li> </ul>
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Doctoral programs are funded according to the provisions of Art. 160 of the *Law of National Education* no. 1/2011: “(1) Education programs can be financed from the state budget, from the tuition fees or from other legal sources. (2) Ministry of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports allocates each year, by government decision, PhD grants for the scientific and arts and Sports professional PhD, a number of Ph.D. multi-annual grants, for a minimum period of three years. The PhD grant includes the quantum of the individual scholarship and the costs for the advanced studies program and the costs for the research program [...]. (3) The PhD grant are provided based on a national scientific project competition between PhD organizing schools or based on a national scientific project competition among PhD mentors, who are members of a PhD organizing school [...].”

Each Doctorate Organizing School is assessed periodically, every five years. This is also the case for PhD supervisors according to Art. 48 of the *Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*. Moreover, there was recently an external institutional evaluation performed on the level of the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad.

The Doctoral School of Biology has been affiliated with the Council for Doctoral Education of the European University Association (EUA-CDE) since 2009. Furthermore, the Doctoral School of Biology was admitted to 3 doctoral CEEPUS (Central European Exchange Program for University Studies) research net-works in December 2015.

The Doctoral School of Biology offers a full-time study program since the academic year 2010/2011. A part-time study program started with the aca-

ademic year 2016/2017; however, it is only open for topics that allow part-time research in the laboratory or clinic and with the approval of the respective doctoral supervisor. The total number of admitted students for the academic years 2011/2012 through 2015/2016 was 28. During this period, there were 46 annual scholarships offered to PhD students. In total, 12 PhD students were involved in international research projects. The average number of publications per student is four. Currently, the Doctoral School of Biology registers 22 PhD graduates: 12 were employed in an academic environment and 10 in a socio-economic environment. All these have been validated by the CNATDCU Biology-Biochemistry Commission. In addition, there are 29 post-doctoral researchers affiliated with the Doctoral School.

Between 2011 and 2016, the doctoral study cycle in Biology had a duration of six semesters (three years) which consisted of the two components "Advanced Training Program" (two semesters) and "Scientific Research Program" (four semesters). The advanced training program consists of compulsory subjects and optional subject packs (two compulsory and two optional subjects), with 30 ECTS credits/semester, i.e. 60 ECTS credits/year. With the start of the academic year 2016-2017, the "Advanced Training Program" was shortened to one semester and the "Scientific Research Program" lengthened to five semesters. The scientific research program is organized individually for each doctoral student by the respective doctoral supervisor and begins after the admission of the scientific research project.

The Doctoral School of Biology currently has five doctoral supervisors and eleven academics and researchers who serve on the supervision committees, actively participating in the scientific research program of doctoral students. According to Art. 167 of Law no. 1/2011 and the University Senate Decision no. 93/2013, a PhD supervisor may simultaneously guide a maximum of 15 PhD candidates. PhD candidates are employed by the IODS as research assistants or as assistant professors for an undefined term according to Art. 37 of *the Code for Doctoral Academic Studies*.

The Doctoral School of Biology grants doctoral students access to the research infrastructure of its institutes, research centres, university clinics and libraries. The University states that the research of doctoral students is mainly conducted at the University's Institute of Life Sciences which was established in 2008. The Institute of Life Sciences is accredited by the Academy of Medi-

cal Sciences and consists of three departments: Experimental and Applied Biology; Biotechnology; and Ecology/Ecotoxicology and Environmental Protection. Furthermore, the University has an experimental animal biobase, an operating room, an Xtreme (Bruker) in vivo imaging system, a Histopathology, Optical Microscopy, Fluorescence and Confocal Microscopy Laboratory, an Electron Microscopy Laboratory, a Molecular Biology Laboratory, a Plant Biotechnology Laboratory and a botanical garden.

## 2 Evaluation Process

### Submitted Documents

The Self-Evaluation Report for the External Institutional Evaluation of the Doctoral School of Biology of the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad (hereinafter "the University" or "VGWU") was submitted to the Accreditation Agency for Study Programs in the Area of Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS) on July 15, 2016. The contract between the University and the AHPGS was signed on December 7, 2016. Apart from the Institutional Self-Assessment Report, the Doctoral School has also submitted the following documents:

#### Specific to the Doctoral School:

Annex	Description
1	Order of the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation No. 365547/20.07.2000; No. 33515, 35624/22.09.2009; No. 37299/17.06.2010; No. 61004/17.01.2013
2	Decision of the Council for Doctoral Academic Studies No. 1/ 16.03.2016; No. 3/ 25.03.2016; No. 19/ 05.07.2016; No. 55/ 31.03.2016; No. 56/ 31.03.2016
3	Internal Regulation of the Doctoral School of Biology; Methodology of Admission; Methodology for Completion of Doctoral Studies
4	Guidelines for drafting and defense of the doctoral thesis; Curriculum for the advanced academic training program 2016-2017; Graduates awarded the PhD Title; List of subscription periodicals available since 2014; list of partner institutions
5	Brochure Institute of Life Sciences
6	Staff members and workload

#### Common:

Annex	Description
A	Meeting Schedule of the Council for Doctoral Academic Studies 2016
B	Decisions of the Council of Doctoral Academic Studies (CDAS) 2016
C	Meeting Schedule of the Council of the Doctoral School 2016

D	Administrative Staff involved in the Management of Doctoral Studies
E	Selective Bibliography with Books for the Doctoral School
F	Planned CEEPUS Mobilities for the Academic Year 2017-2018
G	Required Minimal and Mandatory Standards on Awarding Teaching Titles in the Higher Education and the Professional Degrees in Research-Development
H	CVs of Professors; Publication lists of Professors; Verification of Standards (in Romanian)
I	Number of Candidates for the Admission Exam to Doctoral Studies 2012-2016 (Biology)
J	Number of Candidates for the Admission Exam According to their Prior Studies 2012-2016 (Biology)
K	Number of Doctoral Students employed in Research Projects or Grants; Number of Postdoctoral Students Employed in Research Projects or Grants
L	Revised Internal Regulation Doctoral School
M	Curriculum for Advanced Academic training Program 2016-2017
N	Supplementary Scientific Training Events
O	Framework Regulation of Organization and Functioning of the Postdoctoral Programs at VGWU
P	Graduates' Grades
Q	List of ISI Thomson Web of Science Indexed Articles; List of Articles Indexed in International Databases; List of Patent Applications
R	Number of Publications by Doctoral School Graduates
S	Alumni Employment Rates
T	IODAS-VGWU Strategy of Development for 2016-2020
U	Procedure of Internal Evaluation of the Doctoral Schools of the CDAS-VGWU
V	CDAS-VGWU Procedure of Internal Evaluation of the CDAS-VGWU
W	Quality Management (PowerPoint slide)
X	Code of Ethics and Professional Deontology of the Research-Development

	Staff of the VGWU
Y	Questionnaire regarding the Quality of the Advanced Academic Training Program

## Expert Group

The External Institutional Evaluation is based on the peer-review procedure. The Accreditation Commission of the AHPGS appointed the following experts:<sup>1</sup>

### **Mr. Alexander Bordan**

*Student at the Albert-Ludwigs University in Freiburg, Germany; Graduate of Liberal Arts and Sciences at 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".

### **Mr. 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, Leibniz University in Hannover, Germany; President (2001-2004) of the German Association of Biologists (vdbiol); heavily involved in the Bologna transition in 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 (USA).*

### **Prof. Dr. Gerd Mikus**

*Professor and Deputy Medical Director of the Department of Clinical Pharma-*

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<sup>1</sup> The experts shown in italics participated in the on-site visit of the University.

*cology and Pharmacoepidemiology at the 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 Science in Heidelberg, Germany.*

## **Agenda of the On-Site Visit**

The on-site visit at the Doctoral School of Biology took place on January 29-31, 2017 in Arad, Romania.

Prior to the on-site visit, the submitted documents were preliminarily assessed in written form.

The expert group gathered on January 29 and 30 for preliminary discussions. At these meetings, the submitted documents as well as the arising questions and problems were discussed. Furthermore, the experts agreed upon the planning of the on-site visit.

The on-site visit started in accordance with the specified time schedule. The expert group interviewed the management of the University and of the Doctoral School, the quality assurance staff, program directors, teaching staff and PhD students from both Doctoral Schools. During the excursion around the University, the experts had a chance to see and evaluate the equipment and spatial organization of working premises of students and teaching staff, including libraries, student halls, laboratories, recreation rooms for the teaching staff, lecture and seminar classrooms. Additionally, the expert group also visited the Institute of Life Science. All discussions were carried out in a very open and constructive atmosphere.

The debriefing took place on January 31.

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

### **3 Expert Report Based on Assessment Areas**

The structure of the present Expert Report follows the five Assessment Areas under evaluation that served as assessment parameters for the experts. The summary at the end of the document presents an analysis of strong and weak points based on the Assessment Areas.

#### **A. Profile, Objectives and Strategy of the Institution**

##### **A.1 Profile and Strategy**

The Institution has established a clear profile and its mission and strategy correspond to it. It has developed a strategic plan and formulated short-, medium-, and long-term development plans. It sets future-oriented goals and develops feasible strategies for their implementation. The Institution has also developed a strategy for its research activity.

##### **A.2 Objectives**

The objectives formulated by the Institution can be traced back to its overall strategy and development plans which are internally and externally oriented. The objectives allow for diversity and ethical aspects.

##### **A.3 Participation**

The Institution's teaching and non-teaching staff as well as its students are actively involved in the Institution's strategy development process. They are aware of the goals established by the Institution and work towards their achievement. The Institution's external stakeholders also participate in the strategy development process.

##### **A.4 Institutional Autonomy**

Institutional autonomy is a key value of the Institution; academic freedom is encouraged within the educational institution.

##### **A.1 Profile and Strategy**

The mission of the Doctoral School of Biology of Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad is to train doctoral students through the acquisition of advanced knowledge, skills and abilities of scientific research in biological sciences which lead to building careers in field-specific research, both nationally and internationally.

In the course of the on-site visit, it became evident that the mission of the Doctoral School of Biology encompasses the areas of education, research, professional work and social responsibilities, thus establishing a clear profile.

From the general perspective, the mission of the Doctoral School of Biology stands in line with the general mission of the University, which is to contribute to the development of Romanian higher education through education and scientific research (outlined in the "Strategy of development and diversification of scientific research"), with the purpose of generating and transferring knowledge to the society.

The Doctoral School's strategy plan includes the implementation of a series of competitions for doctoral programs (structural funds for doctoral scholarships, postdoctoral programs, etc.), the attraction of international doctoral students from international Bachelor and Master programs of the University, the promotion of the Doctoral School through national stakeholders of the University and the implementation of a Master program "Biomedical Sciences" (Master of Research), which would provide doctoral candidates with research skills before entering the Doctoral School and thus bridging the existing gap between undergraduate and PhD programs.

The overall strategy of the University and its Doctoral School, especially in view of national and regional priorities, is seen as very positive. The institution is strongly rooted in the Arad region and Western Area of Romania, which are supported by the fact that the Arad community increased its University funding. Furthermore, the University has fulfilled its plans to build and set up sport facilities and even its own hotel. In addition, the efforts to recruit new students and staff are visible, e.g. with the on-going improvement of the University's webpage. The experts have also noted the progress made on the institutional level and regarding the Faculty of Medicine, e.g. the increase in interdisciplinary studies and internationalization. Therefore, the experts encourage the University management to continue their efforts.

On the level of the Doctoral School, the expert group highlights the planned changes in admission rules to improve the academic quality and the increase in the Doctoral School's European networking, mobility efforts and publication outputs.

Important to mention is, that the content structure of doctoral study cycles offered at the Doctoral School of Biology has been revised. The revision was based on amending and supplementing Art. 7 of the Regulation of the Doctoral School of Biology and Art. 39 Para. 2 of the Code of doctoral studies GD 681/2011. The experts describe the current form of the programs as reasonable.

A strategic plan designed for the period of 2016-2020 corresponds to the market and academic demands of Romania and the Arad region. The plan also covers the internationalization intentions of the Doctoral School. The expert group is aware of the national regulations that could become obstacles to international development. These regulations also hinder a formal collaboration between the two Doctoral Schools of the University. The experts encourage the University to continue their political action because the Doctoral Schools should be set up in line with European standards ensuring the recognition of diplomas in the European area.

Another focus of the evaluation was the financial situation of the Doctoral School of Biology. The experts highlight that the University provides robust funding and enjoys great support for research and scholarships within the Arad community. However, the experts also stress the facts that there should be more public funding and that the currently limited access to European funding carries the risk of slowing down the research activities at the Doctoral School. The experts, therefore, recommend increasing the visibility of the Doctoral Schools and the study programs and to proceed with measures of internationalization to attract international students as well as other stakeholders from abroad.

## **A.2 Objectives**

The Doctoral School of Biology formulates short-, medium- and long-term objectives. The Doctoral School aims, for example, at implementing a series of competitions for doctoral programs (structural funds for doctoral scholarships, postdoctoral programs, etc.), attracting international doctoral students from international Bachelor and Master programs, promoting the Doctoral School through national stakeholder of the University, and implementing a Master program "Biomedical Sciences" (Master of Research) in winter semester 2017/2018, if the program will be included in a Government Decision. The

Master program would provide doctoral candidates with improved research skills before entering the Doctoral School.

The research objectives are to improve the infrastructure for research activities, to collaborate in an international research exchange, to improve cooperation with different research institutes both nationally and internationally and to educate future researchers.

The objectives regarding the professional fields are to maintain standards of excellence in the external services provided by the Doctoral School and to extend the range of these services to newly developing technologies, based on recent research achievements.

The educational objectives are to train doctoral students through the acquisition of advanced knowledge, skills and abilities of scientific research in biological sciences, leading to building successful careers in field-specific scientific research, both nationally and internationally.

The objectives also allow for diversity and ethical aspects. The aspects of diversity and students' rights regarding disabilities and chronic illnesses are also regulated by Art. 5 of 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 (such as foster homes) as well as students with disabilities and chronic illnesses by granting them educational scholarships, social scholarships and partially or totally waiving their 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.

To summarize, the main task of the Doctoral School is not only to train professional biologists but also to increase the quality of doctoral studies in general and to improve the international orientation of the studies. The objectives of the programs, which are formulated by the Institution can be traced back to its overall strategy and development plans, which are internally and externally oriented.

At the same time, the experts recommend scaling the described objectives and to use key figures in this respect. This is necessary for a process of improvement. Through key figures and their interpretation - for instance by ana-

lyzing whether graduates are well-prepared for the labor market, for the tasks in academic institutions, etc. - it could become easier to prove the degree of completion of the objectives. As one example, the Doctoral School keeps a record of incoming and outgoing students in percentage relation to the desired amount of enrolled applicants. These numbers could be used more to clarify the financial needs as well as to control the actual budget resources of the Doctoral School. Furthermore, these figures could clarify whether the Doctoral School needs to launch cooperation and attract funding from external stakeholders and other third parties.

As another suggestion for further development, the experts encourage the Doctoral School to strengthen the transparency policy with regard to the organizational structure. The suggestion is to publish English versions of all relevant documents – such as the strategic plan or the business plan – on the website of the University as well as information on the planned Master of Research.

In this context, the crosscutting recommendation of the experts is to transparently present all positive efforts and activities of the Doctoral School to the public as well as to national and international organizations interested in the Doctoral School of Biology.

### **A.3 Participation**

It is emphasized that participation of all involved parties, including the University administration, deans, teaching staff and students, in the academic and social life of the educational institution is an important priority of the University and the Doctoral School in particular.

As one highlight, the expert group was impressed by the high commitment to University life revealed by students during the discussion with them. Students confirmed their active involvement within joint recreational activities and various administrative bodies of the University.

With regard to the aspect of participating bodies, there is the University's Institute of Life Sciences, established in 2008 and accredited by the Academy of Medical Sciences, as well as several University laboratories and the "Pavel Covaci" University Botanical Garden of Macea that serve as teaching and training units for the students of the Doctoral School of Biology. The Institu-

tion's external stakeholders also participate in the strategy development process.

#### **A.4 Institutional Autonomy**

The experts emphasize that the Doctoral School of Biology has been set up autonomously and that there is a robust management structure in place to run the school in accordance with its respective objectives.

The Institution ensures academic freedom and educational responsibility by selecting its own governing bodies, maintaining its own sources of income, deciding staff promotions, and designing the programs and courses that it provides. These duties are envisioned in the regulations of the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, especially chapter III of the Internal Regulation of the University, the *Code of Ethics and Academic Professional Deontology* (Art. 5 etc.) and in Section 4 of the "University Charter" as well as in the "University Code of the Rights and the Obligations of the Students of Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad". It is ensured that the Doctoral School of Biology can practice its academic freedom over all aspects mentioned.

Academic freedom is seen as a right and a fundamental responsibility of each Doctoral School member – teachers as well as doctoral students. Doctoral School members exercise their academic freedom through teaching, research, and creative activities, which are aligned with the generally accepted ethical and University-specific standards.

Taking this into account, the Doctoral School maintains institutional autonomy in an excellent manner. This complies with the *National Law no.1/2011* and encourages diversity and academic freedom.

## **B. Quality Assurance and Quality Management System**

### **B.1 Quality Management**

The Institution has a quality management system and clearly defined objectives. Internal steering processes are identifiable and aim at continuous improvement. Policies and procedures for quality assurance are implemented and quality culture is promoted. The quality management system applies a quality control loop.

Tasks are divided among the bodies and the staff of the Institution.

The quality assurance mechanisms are designed to accomplish the set objectives, monitor effectiveness and seek improvement. Quality assurance includes evaluation mechanisms that are run regularly and cover all activities within the Institution.

### **B.2 Documentation and Improvement**

Evaluation results are documented and taken into consideration for the further improvement of the Institution and its study programs.

The Institution continuously develops plans to improve the quality management system, which is part of the Institution's strategic plan. It works at different organizational levels and involves the entire Institution staff.

### **B.1 Quality Management**

The University has built up a rigorous internal quality assurance system with clearly defined objectives. The system has been implemented; structures, responsibilities and procedures are in place. Furthermore, the University has established a regulatory "Code of Quality Assurance of Education," with predilection on teaching and learning, learning environment, relevant links with research and innovation in the University. The term "quality assurance" in this code is used to describe all activities in the cycle of continuous improvement, so that the study programs and the services offered meet the expectations of beneficiaries (internal and external stakeholders). The IQM system respects the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ESG).

Each faculty has an evaluation commission whose members have to be reapproved annually through the faculty council (see Annex 2). The University also has a Quality Assurance Department as required by Romanian law. Additionally, each faculty provides internal reports as requested per the Romanian National Standards.



Furthermore, the University has a "Quality Assurance Manual" at its disposal which presents the quality policy and refers to the procedures of the quality assurance system. Moreover, it describes interactions between the processes of the system and presents the structure of documentation used within the quality management system. The Quality Manual is structured according to SR ISO 10 013:2003. Feedback loops are foreseen. A management information system is currently built up and profits from modern IT-structures.

The experts note that the IQS of Vasile Goldis University is based on ISO norms and follows a Total-Quality-Management approach. The University also publishes evaluation results. 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 an IQS system to be as lean as possible to ensure long-term acceptance and sustainability. With this in view, the IQS System should be periodically reviewed and improved. Furthermore, the experts recommend the University to systematically close the QA-feedback loops to build up an encompassing Management Information System and to use the information for steering the University. In this regard, the University should also consistently use the results when adjusting the strategy. As a second step, the adjustment of the structure should follow.

The quality assurance system of the Doctoral School of Biology is consistent with the University's. It was established to develop and maintain the quality of the Doctoral School at the highest possible level and to support the strategy of the University.

The responsible body for the quality assurance system at the Doctoral School level is the Council of the Doctoral School. As part of the Doctoral School Council, a student representative is also integrated in the quality management process. Moreover, the experts are pleased to see that internal and external reviews are also involved in the quality assurance system. Tasks are divided among the bodies and the staff of the Institution.

The internal evaluation is conducted annually by the Doctoral School Council and focuses on the mission, objectives, content and curriculum of the doctoral study program. The tenured doctoral supervisors are assessed every five years based on their research results and achievements in supervising doctoral students. The doctoral students also undergo assessment based on their research

results. In addition, the Doctoral School is externally evaluated every five years by a quality assurance agency. The quality assurance mechanisms are visible on all levels and are designed to accomplish the set objectives, monitor effectiveness and seek improvement. Furthermore, the experts are pleased to see that internal and external reviews are included and that quality assurance is included on all levels. They highlight special internal evaluations such as the aspect of internationalization, and encourage the University to continue its quality assurance efforts while focusing on outcome and output and to use those results for public information. Furthermore, the University should also continue to build up its quality management system and ensure that key figures of the *Order of the Minister of National Education and Scientific Research No. 6153/2016, regarding approval of the Methodology of authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of doctoral schools, by domain*, are integrated in and used for the formulation of plans.

## **B.2 Documentation and Improvement**

General processes regarding documentation are implemented. The Doctoral School's annual reports on quality assurance are prepared in accordance with the rules of the University with integrated feedback loops. Here, the experts encourage the Doctoral School to explain how this form of an inter-organizational feedback system functions. Therewith could the many useful measures of the Doctoral School be shown to the public.

However, some recommendations for improvement arise. All those involved in the quality evaluation procedure should be informed on how and for what purposes the obtained results are going to be used. The experts had the impression that the University has collected a large amount of data on quality evaluation; however, they have also expressed their concerns about whether this data is actually analyzed and implemented for the improvement of study programs. It might be reasonable to reduce the amount of information as well as the amount of work performed to gather it and rather focus on productively applying of available data.

With regard to the aspect of transparency of the quality assurance activities, the Doctoral School the experts encourage the University to continue its quality assurance efforts and to publicize the results. An English website offers information about the doctoral study program for potential international stu-

dents and visiting teacher. Nevertheless, the experts recommend that it should be updated in a more timely manner and in accordance with the Romanian version. This is important in order to insure that potential Romanian and international students have the same access to information provided by the Doctoral School. Furthermore, publication of annual reports in English increases the Doctoral School's recognition abroad and also serves as distinct evidence of the School's transparency policy.

The experts conclude that evaluation results are documented and taken into consideration for the further improvement of the Institution and its study programs. The Institution continuously develops plans to improve the quality management system, which is part of the Institution's strategic plan. It works at different organizational levels and involves the entire Institution staff.

## **C. Institutional Management and Administration**

### **C.1 Organization and Responsibilities**

The Institution's organizational structure demonstrates a clear and transparent division of responsibilities, duties and authorities. External stakeholders, students and other relevant parties are involved in the administrative and decision-making processes; the organizational structure corresponds to the strategy and objectives set by the Institution.

### **C.2 Information System**

The Institution regulates the allocation of tasks and responsibilities, which is done in an unambiguous and transparent way. The Institution members are aware of their tasks and responsibilities.

An information system has been developed for monitoring and evaluating the effective management of the study programs and all other activities within the Institution.

### **C.3 Cooperation**

Collaborations and partnerships with universities, companies and other institutions are described and documented. The agreements underlying the collaboration are supported with documentation.

### **C.1 Organization and Responsibilities**

The Doctoral School of Biology acts in line with the principle of academic autonomy. The document *Doctoral School of Biology Internal Regulation* serves as the regulating force at the Doctoral School. It includes detailed description of all relevant aspects related to general provision, the Doctoral School's activities and legal capacity as well as the structure of the School, its bodies and doctoral study program.

The expert group had the impression that there is a robust management with clear and transparent structures and regulations in charge: The management of the Doctoral School of Biology consists of two bodies: the Director of the Doctoral School of Biology and the Council of the Doctoral School of Biology. The position of the Director of the Doctoral School is comparable to the position of Head of Department and the Doctoral School Council to the Council of Department. The Director is appointed by the Council and must be a doctoral supervisor of the Doctoral School.

The Council has five members: the director of the Doctoral School, two doctoral supervisors of the Doctoral School, one doctoral student and one member not affiliated with the School who enjoys significant scientific recognition internationally and/or is a person from relevant industrial and socio-economic sectors.

The administrative office of the Doctoral School of Biology comprises at least one secretary whose tasks include documentation (e.g. keeping nominal and academic records of doctoral students) and organization (e.g. undertaking secretarial duties for the Doctoral School Council). Hence, the Institution's organizational structure demonstrates a clear and transparent division of responsibilities, duties and authorities. External stakeholders, students and other relevant parties are involved in the administrative and decision-making processes; the organizational structure corresponds to the strategy and objectives set by the Institution.

The on-site visit has revealed that the teaching staff and the students largely identify themselves with the Doctoral School and all participants (top down and on all levels) show strong commitment to the School's activities.

The University affirms its interest in its graduates and therefore maintains close contact with them. The Doctoral School of Biology currently has 22 alumni. Twelve are employed in the academic field and ten in socioeconomic fields.

The Doctoral School has a good methodology for institutional management. The regulations transparently cover the segregation of duties and responsibilities of the management members.

## **C.2 Information System**

The Institution regulates the allocation of tasks and responsibilities, which is done in an unambiguous and transparent way. The Institution members are aware of their tasks and responsibilities. An information system has been developed for monitoring and evaluating the effective management of the study programs and all other activities within the Institution.

On the whole, the Doctoral School has transparent organizational structures and well-documented regulations.

### **C.3 Cooperation**

The Doctoral School of Biology is active in internationalization through international cooperation and exchanges such as the Council for Doctoral Education of the European University Association (EUA-CDE) and the Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (CEEPUS). Furthermore, a number of research projects funded by the “Hungary-Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme” have promoted internationalization.

An International Office has been established to support students and teachers in this regard. It provides full support and information regarding international mobility to all students, academic staff and research staff.

The Doctoral School’s international activities are evaluated by monitoring the number of incoming foreign students and the number of outgoing students, as well as by monitoring the international exchange of academic staff.

In the time between 2012 and 2015, twelve doctoral students have had internships abroad. However, all of these internships were conducted in Hungary and eleven out of the twelve at the Nyiregyhaza University College.

Between 2011 and 2016, the Doctoral School was involved in the organization of some 27 conferences, workshops and schools of advanced study in which doctoral students could actively participate, including for example the “Jean Monteuil Francophone Summer School” with specialists from Romania, France, Belgium and Canada.

Collaborations and partnerships with universities, companies and other institutions are described and documented. The agreements underlying the collaboration are supported with documentation.

Still, for further development regarding the aspect of internationalization the experts suggest continuing the collaborative efforts and to seek orientation and funding among European research organizations and bodies. Furthermore, intensive mobility efforts are recommended – incentives could be set. In addition, inter- and transdisciplinary efforts should be continued since these are a strong point of the Doctoral School. In this regard, the Master program “Bio-medical Sciences” could both build a bridge to smooth the way to doctoral studies for students and also offer an attractive offer for international students owing to the English language of instruction (see D.1).

## **D. Educational Activities Including Study Programs**

### **D.1 Study Programs**

The Institution defines clear goals for each study program and additional educational programs, which corresponds and relates to the Institution's profile and mission.

The study programs include research-related components depending on the profile and final qualification. They are consistently differentiated and show individual particularities. They are comparable in the higher educational system and correspond to the educational and qualification level they are aimed at.

### **D.2 Study Process**

The Institution has procedures for the planning of the teaching and learning processes as well as implementation of its study programs.

Admission requirements and student evaluation methods are clear, manageable and made publicly available. The Institution has established mechanisms to support and counsel its students.

### **D.3 Advanced Training**

The Institution also provides subject-specified and advanced didactic training for its staff.

### **D.4 International Mobility**

The Institution promotes exchange programs and international mobility among its students and teaching staff.

### **D.1 Study Programs**

The Doctoral School of Biology's mission is to train doctoral students through the acquisition of advanced knowledge, skills and abilities of scientific research in biological sciences in order to lead to scientific research careers in the field.

The doctoral study cycle and its learning outcomes form a unitary concept via the required subject-oriented and structured list of knowledge and skills that the students have to master to be able to graduate. The Doctoral School brings together various disciplines of biology as well as multidisciplinary approaches within the bio-medical field and from other interdisciplinary fields. The research topics of the doctoral students are formulated based on the expertise of the doctoral supervisors and projects of the Doctoral School. The

topics are posted annually on the Doctoral School section of the University's website two months before the start of the admission period.

The Doctoral School/University's leadership reviews the doctoral programs regularly. The main goal is to assure compliance with the Doctoral School/University's overall mission and strategy. Hence, it is established that the programs successfully comply with Romanian legislation.

The doctoral study cycle at the Doctoral School of Biology has a duration of six semesters (three years). The first semester consists of "Advanced Training" and the following five semesters consist of "Scientific Research". The "Advanced Training" in the first semester has the following subjects: "Scientific Research Methodology", "Scientific Research Ethics", "Design and Drafting of a Scientific Paper" and "Statistical Processing of Experimental Data". Doctoral students are awarded 30 CP for the completion of these courses.

The experts conclude that, the institution defines clear goals and learning outcomes for each study program and additional educational programs, which correspond and relate to the institution's profile and mission. The experts recommend continuing to plan study programs which focus on learning outcomes and the achievement of competences.

Beginning with the academic year 2017/2018 the Doctoral School of Biology plans to host the Master study program "Biomedical Sciences" (Master of Research). Graduates of the program should be able to apply methods and techniques of inter-/trans-disciplinary specific investigation specific to the biomedical field (cellular, genomic and transcriptomic biology, cellular signalization, molecular bases of the human maladies, molecular neurobiology, basic aspects of the pathologic mechanisms of diseases, study of the genetic determinism of some pathologic human conditions). Moreover, they are trained to investigate and interpret the cellular and molecular bases of organization and functioning of the human body in normal and pathological conditions. They should possess knowledge of the principles and norms for organization and functioning of the specialty laboratories and are able to evaluate, analyze and issue studies, professional reports and scientific papers. The aim of the Master study program is to provide potential PhD students with research skills required in both Doctoral Schools of the University (Biology and Medicine). Thus, the experts regard the development of the interdisciplinary "Biomedical Sciences" study program as very positive. It would increase the quality of



future PhD candidates and also give the doctoral students more time for actual research and publications within their respective PhD programs. Furthermore, the experts highlight the fact that the “Biomedical Sciences” program has the potential to not only attract Romanian students but also students from abroad, due to the teaching language of the program being English.

From the experts’ point of view, the study programs correspond well to the University’s overall mission and strategy. They appreciate the building up of programs in the spirit of a learning-outcome-oriented and module-oriented approach.

## **D.2 Study Process**

The Doctoral School of Biology offers a full-time study program since the academic year 2010/2011. A part-time study program began with the academic year 2016/2017, but only for topics that allow part-time research in the laboratory or clinic and with the approval of the respective doctoral supervisor. The total number of admitted students for the academic years 2011/2012 through 2015/2016 was 28.

At the Doctoral School, evaluation of the study process is done by both the students and the teaching staff. The Doctoral Council reviews the study process. From the experts’ point of view, more transparency is necessary in order to demonstrate how the evaluation results can directly affect the improvement of the teaching process. Again, it should be underlined that the collected data should primarily serve to improve the programs. Moreover, information on quality maintenance received during meetings should also be documented and used for the continuous improvement of the two programs.

The Doctoral School has officially regulated procedures for the planning of its teaching and learning processes as well as implementation of its study programs. The admission requirements and student evaluation methods are clear, manageable and publicly available. Admission candidates to the Doctoral School of Biology must hold a Romanian Master degree or international equivalent. Candidates who have graduated in a Bachelor study program in medicine with a duration of 6 years and a total of 360 CP are also eligible. Citizens of EU Member States, states of the European Economic Area and of the Swiss Confederation have the same admission rights and requirements to access doctoral studies as Romanian citizens, including the same tuition fees.

Admission to the doctoral study program at the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad is regulated by the *Methodology of Admission* at the Doctoral Academic Studies. The experts note that not only updated admission guidelines but also new curricula and regulations regarding the thesis are given.

The admission examination for the Doctoral School of Biology between the academic years 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 consisted of an interview in which the prospective doctoral student presented a project on his/her potential research topic to the admission committee.

Regarding the ratio of the number of candidates to available places in the Doctoral School of Biology, the average ratio for the period of 2012-2016 was 0.32 (a total of 94 places to a total of 30 candidates). 17 of the 30 candidates in the period between 2012 and 2016 completed previous studies at Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, twelve candidates from another institution in Romania and one candidate from a university abroad.

With the start of the academic year 2016/2017, the Doctoral School Council decided to implement a new admission system, including a specialized test. Thereby, the Doctoral School aims at a more rigorous selection of candidates and medium-term increase in the scientific performance. Furthermore, all applicants have to provide a language certificate proving their language competence. The expert group welcomes the decision by the University to implement the new admission system because it will ultimately increase the quality of the doctoral study program.

Additionally, the Institution has established mechanisms to support and counsel its students.

### **D.3 Advanced Training**

During the on-site visit, the use of continuous education programs for staff was discussed. Regarding the continuous aspect of internationalization, the experts recommend making English language competence on a level of C1 according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages a requirement for professors teaching in English study programs. English language courses should also be mandatory for all personnel. The University could also consider offering incentives to motivate the teaching staff to participate in courses for further development.

Furthermore, the University should invest in both domestic and foreign recruitment efforts. This could be done, for instance, by building up more English courses and by supporting and assisting the mobility of students and teachers. The University provided the expert group with a report on ERASMUS mobilities. The experts stress the point that the interpretation of numbers – for example “why are there often only short exchanges aside from the medicine program?” – is very important. Currently, a website in English language is under construction, the availability of which has been deemed by the experts as indispensable for visibility and future development, especially regarding the offered study programs and the possibilities to join the University.

#### **D.4 International Mobility**

The Doctoral School of Biology encourages international exchange programs for both its students and teaching staff. In terms of teaching staff mobility, the University states that it has had a total of 19 incoming and 16 outgoing teachers until now. The University has set a goal to double this number by the year 2020. The expert group was convinced that the Institution provides support to its students and teaching staff in organizing and implementing their studies abroad. Still, the advancement of the internationalization strategy of the University by means of teaching experience exchanges with other higher education institutions abroad should be further pursued.

The International Office provides full support as well as updated information regarding international mobility to all students, academic staff, and research staff.

Three CEEPUS mobilities are planned for the academic year 2017-2018: Bioethics (Semmelweis University); Education of Modern Analytical and Bioanalytical Methods (University of Graz, University of Science and Technology in Krakow); Biology, Biotechnology and Food Sciences (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna, University of Debrecen, Szent Istvan University, Pedagogical University of Krakow, Warsaw University of Life Sciences).

## **E. Infrastructure and Functional Resources**

### **E.1 Functional Resources**

The resources are an essential element of the Institution's strategic plan. The Institution provides sufficient spatial and material resources for all teaching, learning, research and administrative activities. The resources meet the requirements of the numbers of the enrolled students as well as the teaching and administrative staff. The Institution develops plans to constantly enhance its resources.

The Institution has a library that provides adequate learning resources for its study programs. If required, the Institution employs additional premises available for further activities (for example, laboratories and computer rooms).

### **E.2 Staff**

The Institution has mechanisms for recruiting its teaching and administrative staff that are clear, transparent and based on qualification and experience requirements. The duties and responsibilities of the staff correspond to their qualifications and experience. The number of Institution employees allows for developing all the Institution's current and planned activities.

### **E.3 Finances**

The Institution's financial planning considers short- and long-term aspects. The Institution secures sufficient turnover; its budget is clearly and transparently planned and covers all expenses.

### **E.1 Functional Resources**

As part of the on-site visit, the buildings and premises of the Doctoral School and Institute of Life Sciences were inspected. During the tour around several laboratories, seminar and lecture halls, the expert group observed the available facilities. The experts had a positive overall impression of the premises and facilities of the Doctoral School.

The Doctoral School of Biology grants doctoral students access to the research infrastructure of its institutes, research centers, university clinics and libraries. The University states that the research of doctoral students is mainly conducted at the University's Institute of Life Sciences which was established in 2008. The Institute of Life Sciences is accredited by the Academy of Medical Sciences and consists of three departments: Experimental and Applied Biology; Biotechnology; and Ecology/Ecotoxicology and Environmental Protection. Furthermore, the University has an experimental animal biobase, an oper-

ating room, an Xtreme (Bruker) in vivo imaging system, a Histopathology, Optical Microscopy, Fluorescence and Confocal Microscopy Laboratory, an Electron Microscopy Laboratory, a Molecular Biology Laboratory, a Plant Biotechnology Laboratory and a botanical garden.

Doctoral students have access to the University's "Tudor Arghezi Library" which provides free access to more than 528,000 volumes (98,000 titles), 77 subscriptions to specialized national and international periodicals and five databases, viz. LEGISplus, Web of Science (Thomson Reuters), Science Direct, Springerlink and CEEOL.

As a part of the University, the Doctoral School is also equipped with computer labs. Moreover, the University offers its students numerous services and assistant programs.

The expert group is convinced that resources are an essential element of the Institution's strategic plan. The Institution provides sufficient spatial and material resources for all teaching, learning, research and administrative activities. The resources meet the requirements of the numbers of the enrolled students as well as the teaching and administrative staff. The Institution develops plans to continuously enhance its resources. If required, the Institution can provide additional premises available for further activities (e.g. laboratories and computer rooms). Nevertheless, the expert group presumes that additional continuous investments into the infrastructure of the Doctoral School are unavoidable in order to stay up to date in terms of research possibilities.

The experts highlight that most buildings of the Doctoral School are accessible for disabled students.

## **E.2 Staff**

During the on-site visit it was discussed how the search and selection procedure for professors works; this information also helped to determine that qualification and experience of the personnel are adequate to ensure the proper operation of the higher education institution.

The management positions within the University are filled in a way that obeys the conditions stipulated in Chapter XI, sections 1-2 and Chapter XII, sections 2-4 of the *Law of National Education* in Romania no. 1/2001. According to the legislation in force, for the term 2016-2020, the management positions

were filled either by general elections or public contest, depending on the case. The students are represented with a 25 % share in all management structures except the Board of Directors, according to the previously mentioned legal regulations. The President and the members of the Board of Directors, in case of private universities, are appointed by the founding members, according to the Art. 211 of the *Law of National Education*. Subsequently, appointment of the members of the Board of Directors is done in accordance with Art. 10 of the *Foundation Statute*.

The Doctoral School of Biology currently has four doctoral supervisors and eleven academics and researchers who serve on the supervision committees, actively overseeing the scientific research program of doctoral students.

The administrative office of the Doctoral School of Biology comprises at least one secretary whose tasks include documentation (e.g. keeping nominal and academic records of doctoral students) and organization (e.g. undertaking secretarial duties for the Doctoral School Council); also employed by the Doctoral School of Biology are a librarian, a staff member of the scientometry office, a laboratory assistant, two technicians, a staff member of the financial department, two staff members of the Counselling and Career Guidance Center, and one staff member of the International Relations Department (CEEPUS mobilities).

The experts sum up that the institution has mechanisms for recruiting its teaching and administrative staff. Recruiting procedures are well-documented. A specific level of qualification and experience is required for members of the Doctoral School's teaching staff. The Doctoral School shows clear awareness of qualification requirements set for the members of the academic staff. The required experience and activities assigned to the staff are also well-defined. The duties and responsibilities of the staff correspond to their qualifications and experience.

The experts point out that the number of doctoral supervisors is too limited given their important and labor intensive role. This might be an obstacle to the current and planned development of the institution. Therefore, the experts encourage the University to continue its recruitment efforts, e.g. by looking for international or joint supervisors. Additionally, the experts suggest building up a tutoring system in order to support students in the labs.

All staff has the opportunity for professional development. Position-related development is regulated on national and University levels.

### **E.3 Finances**

Doctoral studies organized by the Doctoral School of Biology are funded mainly by tuition fees. Other sources of funding are scholarships and grants from public, European, and institutional funds or other legal sources.

From the experts' point of view, suitable financing is provided by the University. Additionally, the University enjoys good support for research and scholarships within the Arad community. Nevertheless, the lack of public funding and the so far limited access to European funding carries the risk of slowing down research at the Doctoral School. The experts therefore suggest continuing fundraising with a special focus on EU funding possibilities, which could, for example, help to cover future spending on lab supplies and to help stay one step ahead of any development efforts.

## 4 Summary

The expert group appreciates the open and constructive atmosphere of all discussions. From the experts' point of view, the *Order of the Minister of National Education and Scientific Research No. 6153/2016, regarding approval of the Methodology of authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of doctoral schools, by domain* (with *Appendix – Criteria, standards, and performance indicators used in the accreditation and regular evaluation of a doctoral school*) is mainly fulfilled. Nevertheless, the experts point out that they have focused on the ESG assessment areas for the external institutional evaluation (see 1.1). The experts highlight that Vasile Goldis Western University is the first university in Romania to conduct an evaluation of Doctoral Schools. Moreover, an external institutional evaluation on the level of Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad was performed recently.

In summation, the experts gained a very positive overall impression of the University, the two corresponding doctoral schools and their programs. There is a robust quality assurance system in place on the University level. All mechanisms of quality management on the level of the Doctoral School are embedded there. The expert group discerns a clear profile in Life Science regarding the Doctoral School, which is in line with the overall strategy of the University. It also correlates with the national and European agenda. The doctoral programs contribute to the economic welfare of the country. The experts have taken note of the dynamic interaction between the PhD students from both Doctoral Schools and encourage the University to further strengthen these synergies. In addition, the process of internationalization and at the same time the visibility of the University on a European scale should be expedited. To conclude, the experts support the developments that were shown by the University including for instance the plans for the new Master of Research program "Biomedical Sciences" affiliated with the Doctoral School of Biology. The experts are convinced that the Doctoral School provides all necessary special and material resources. The infrastructure of the Institute of Life Science is especially excellent, and the services offered to students appear to be very good.

To conclude, the experts recommend the accreditation of the Doctoral School of Biology.



## **Strengths**

### **Assessment Area A**

- The mission of the Doctoral School stands in line with the general mission of the University, which is to contribute to the achievement of the Romanian higher education.
- The overall strategy of the University and its Doctoral School, especially in view of national and regional priorities, is seen as very positive. The institution is strongly rooted in the Western Area of Arad.
- A strategic plan designed for the period of 2016-2020 corresponds to the market and academic demands of Romania and the Arad region. The plan also covers the internationalization intentions of the Doctoral School.
- The University provides a robust funding and enjoys great support for research and scholarships within the Arad community.
- The objectives of the programs which are formulated by the Institution can be traced back to its overall strategy and development plans, which are internally and externally oriented.
- The participation of all involved parties, including University administration, deans, teaching staff, and students, in academic and social life of the educational institution is an important priority for the University and the Doctoral School in particular.
- The Doctoral School has been set up in autonomously. There is a robust management structure in place to run the school in accordance with its respective objectives.

### **Assessment Area B**

- The University has built up a rigorous internal quality assurance system with clearly defined objectives. The quality assurance system of the Doctoral School is consistent with the quality assurance system developed at the Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad. The quality assurance mechanisms are visible on all levels and are designed to accomplish the set objectives, monitor effectiveness and seek improvement. General processes regarding documentation are implemented.

### **Assessment Area C**

- The Doctoral School has a good methodology for institutional management. It has transparent organizational structures and well-documented regulations.

### **Assessment Area D**

- The Aaster program “Biomedical Sciences” could both build a bridge to smooth the way to doctoral studies for students and offer an attractive opportunity for international students owing to its English language of instruction.
- The Institution has procedures for the planning of its teaching and learning processes as well as implementation of its programs. The study process is evaluated by both the students and the teaching staff. The Doctoral Council reviews the study process.

### **Assessment Area E**

- The Doctoral School grants doctoral students access to the re-search infrastructure of its institutes, research centers, university clinics and libraries. In this regard, the Institute of Life Sciences, which is accredited by the Academy of Medical Sciences, has to be highlighted.
- The institution has mechanisms for recruiting its teaching and administrative staff. Recruiting procedures are well-documented.

## **Recommendations**

### **Assessment Area A**

- The University should continue its political action (e.g. by exploring the possibility for a formal collaboration between Doctoral Schools). The Doctoral Schools should be set up in line with European standards, thus ensuring the recognition of diplomas in the European area.
- The lack of public funding and the so far limited access to European funding carries the risk of slowing down the research activities at the Doctoral School. The visibility of the Doctoral Schools and the study programs should be increased and measures of internationalization should be promoted to attract international students as well as other stakeholders from abroad.

- The program-specific objectives should be scaled and key figure should be used. Herewith, it could become easier to prove the degree of completion of the objectives.
- The Doctoral School is encouraged to strengthen its transparency policy with regard to its organizational structure. The suggestion is to publish English versions of all relevant documents – such as the strategic plan and business plan, as well as information on the planned Master of Research program – on the website of the University.

### **Assessment Area B**

- The importance of an IQS system being as lean as possible is emphasized in order to ensure long-term acceptance and sustainability. With this viewpoint the IQS System should be periodically reviewed and improved. Furthermore, it is important to systematically close the QA-feedback loops to build up an encompassing Management Information System and to use the information to steer the University. In this regard, the University should also consistently use the ensuing results when adjusting its strategy. Subsequently, the adjustment of the structure would follow.
- The University is encouraged to continue its quality assurance efforts while focusing on outcome and output and to publicize these results. Furthermore, the University should also continue to build up its quality management system and make sure that key figures of the *Order of the Minister of National Education and Scientific Research No. 6153/2016, regarding approval of the Methodology of authorization, accreditation and periodical evaluation of doctoral schools, by domain* are integrated and used regarding the formulation of plans.
- It might be reasonable to reduce the amount of data on evaluation as well as the amount of work performed to gather it, and rather focus on productive application of available data.
- Paying attention to the English version of the Doctoral School website is highly recommended. Furthermore, publication of annual reports in English would increase the Doctoral School's recognition abroad and also serve as distinct evidence of the School's transparency policy.

### **Assessment Area C**

- For further development regarding the aspect of internationalization, collaborative efforts should be continued and the University should seek orientation among European research structures. Furthermore, intensive mobility efforts are recommended; incentives could be set. In addition, inter- and transdisciplinary efforts should also be continued. since this is a strong point of the Doctoral School.

### **Assessment Area D**

- The review of the study process should be made more transparent in order to demonstrate how the evaluation results can directly improve the teaching process. Furthermore, information on quality maintenance received during meetings should also be documented and used for the continuous improvement of the two programs.
- English language competence on a level of C1 according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages should be a requirement for professors teaching in English study programs. English language courses should be mandatory for all personnel. Nevertheless, the University could also think about offering incentives to increase the motivation of the teaching staff to participate in courses for further development.
- The University should invest in recruitment efforts, both domestic and abroad. This could be done by, for instance, building up more English courses or supporting and assisting the mobility of students and teachers. In this regard, the advancement of the internationalization strategy of the University by means of teaching experience exchange with other higher education institutions abroad should also be further pursued.

### **Assessment Area E**

- The number of doctoral supervisors is limited which might be an obstacle to the development of the institution's current and planned activities. Therefore, the University is encouraged to continue its recruitment efforts, e.g. by looking for international or joint supervisors. Finally, the experts suggest building up a tutoring system in order to support students in the labs.