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Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (SNSPA)

EVALUATION REPORT

August 2013

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Performance
in Higher Education





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1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of the *National University of Political Studies and Public Administration* in Romania. The evaluation took place in 2012-2013 (first visit December 2012, second visit June 2013) in the framework of the project “Performance in Research, Performance in Teaching – Quality, Diversity, and Innovation in Romanian Universities”, which aims at strengthening core elements of Romanian universities, such as their autonomy and administrative competences, by improving their quality assurance and management proficiency.

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

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

1.1. The Institutional Evaluation Programme

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

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:

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

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

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

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a “fitness for (and of) purpose” approach:



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- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

1.2. The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration and the national context

The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) was established in the post-December 1989 era with the mission to provide initial and continuing professional training, originally at a postgraduate level only, in the fields of political, administrative and social sciences, thus meeting private and public sector demands. In 1995 it became a public higher education institution of university status, offering programmes at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels in the areas of political and administrative sciences, international relations and European integration, social communication and management. At present the SNSPA offers a larger number of Master than Bachelor programmes, although there is a higher number of students enrolled in Bachelor programmes.

Under the provisions of the National Education Law of 2011, which was valid at the time of the evaluation visits, Romanian higher education institutions (HEIs) have been classified into three groups: advanced research universities; teaching and research universities; and teaching universities. The SNSPA is one of the HEIs that have been classified as a teaching and research university. It is, however, the strong view of the university that the methodology used for the above-mentioned classification does not do justice to institutions specialising in the social sciences and to their national (as opposed to international) research orientation and publications. The SNSPA aspires, therefore, to be classified as an advanced research university, aligning its overall institutional strategy and actions to this end. In 2009 the SNSPA was also rated as an institution of *High Degree of Confidence*, which is the highest possible rate, as a result of an external institutional evaluation organised by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

1.3. The SNSPA's self-evaluation process

Prior to the first visit the evaluation team received a 40-page Self-Evaluation Report (SER), in accordance with the IEP methodology and guidelines. The SER described the SNSPA's institutional context, the internal organisation in faculties and research institutes/laboratories, the norms, values, mission and goals, the governance and management structures, quality assessment practices, as well as a SWOT analysis of the institutions' strengths and weakness, its strategic management and capacity for change. The SER annexes also included the university's Charter, the rector's managerial programme for 2012-2016, the university's strategic plan for quality assessment and assurance, as well as the university's strategic plan for the years 2008-2012.



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The self-evaluation process was undertaken by a self-evaluation team, composed of professors, teaching assistants and a PhD student. The team's work was coordinated by Prof. Nicoleta Corbu, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations of the SNSPA. Team members held different meetings with other members of the institution, deans, department directors, academics, administrative and technical staff at both the central and faculty levels, and students in order to collect information, discuss issues, exchange views and prepare the report.

In addition to presenting information on the SNSPA, the SER was fit for purpose since it was not merely a thorough description of the status quo and challenges, but it also showed elements of a self-critical and self-reflective stance on the institution's activities and workings, identifying strong and weak points as well as areas where there is real scope for action and where improvement is needed. These features were further enhanced by the overall openness and frankness of staff, including also its central management staff, in the meetings and discussions held with the evaluation team members during evaluation visits. The IEP evaluation team appreciated the work done in the SER as well as additional documentation and information provided, and clarifications given on certain issues. The evaluation team, therefore, believes that it has been able to get an adequate understanding of the current situation of the SNSPA.

1.4. The evaluation team

The self-evaluation report of the SNSPA, together with the annexes, was sent to the evaluation team (hereafter "the team") in October 2012. The two visits of the evaluation team to the SNSPA took place from 5 to 7 December 2012 and from 9 to 12 June 2013, respectively. In the team's view the long interval between the two visits, which was mainly caused by an unexpected change of rector due to the rector having become Minister of Education, has – though regrettable – not undermined the depth of understanding of essential aspects of the institution. In between the visits the SNSPA provided additional documentation requested by the team on institutional funding and completion rates of students. These requests related to issues discussed during the first visit. It has not been possible, however, for the team to obtain the SNSPA Strategic Plan 2013-2016, as it was in the process of development and deliberation within the university and its decision-making bodies, and a complete draft was going to be available soon after the second visit of the team.

The evaluation team consisted of:

- Jürgen Kohler, former Rector, Greifswald University, Germany, and former chair of the German Accreditation Council, Chair
- Gerald Bast, Rector, University of Applied Sciences in Vienna, Austria
- Roger King, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln, United Kingdom
- Erazem Bohinc, graduate student, European Faculty of Law, Slovenia



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- Apostolis Dimitropoulos, (PhD, London School of Economics) Expert in Higher Education Policy, Greece, Team Coordinator

The team would like to thank the SNSPA Rector Professor Remus Pricopie, who soon after the first visit was appointed Minister of Education of Romania, as well as his successor Professor Alina Bargaoanu for their welcoming hospitality and all efforts made in order to ensure that the two visits and the whole process were well-organised, smooth running, and as productive as possible.

Special thanks are also offered by the IEP team in particular to the chair of the self-evaluation group, Prof. Nicoleta Corbu, Camelia Bucuroia for liaising with the Team, and to the self-evaluation team members, as well as the academic and administrative staff, students and external partners who participated in the meetings held, for their preparedness to discuss relevant matters, and share knowledge, experiences and views on the SNSPA, in a collegial way and in some cases with remarkable enthusiasm.



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2. Governance and institutional decision-making

The norms and values of the SNSPA are illustrated in the mission and principles set out in the university's Charter (2011) and further analysed in the self-evaluation report. The SNSPA is a public institution of higher education and research and functions on the principles of academic autonomy, self-management and academic freedom. The mission of the SNSPA is to promote advanced scientific research and to provide graduate and post-graduate education through high quality academic and professional education programmes. Its distinctiveness as a higher education institution lies in its vision to link the academic process, including educational as well as research activities, with Romania's actual transformation processes, and the aspiration to meet real needs in Romanian society and political sphere.

The SNSPA educational programmes and activities aim primarily at training "elite" specialists in the areas of public administration, political sciences, communication, management, and international relations. Research activities aim at building an institutional status as an important investigator in the above-mentioned academic fields with a strong view on practice, in the national, regional and international context.

Already in its first visit the IEP team gained the impression of an ambitious institution, with marked aspirations to be a leading force in the academic areas it serves and a top-level education centre for the Romanian political and administrative elites. As the team specifically heard, the SNSPA aspires to play a role in the Romanian national and wider regional context similar to that played by the *École normale d'administration* (ENA) in the French national context and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in the US context. According to external partners involved in the decisions founding the SNSPA in the early 1990s, such were the initial goals for the foundation of the SNSPA.

It is against these institutional aspirations that the 2011 classification of the SNSPA as a "teaching and research" institution —instead of "advanced research" institution, as the university would have ambitioned to —has mobilised its management and staff to rethink its overall strategy, by setting as a priority institutional goals to enhance its international research profile, relevance and visibility.

External constraints

During the discussions with the SNSPA staff the IEP team learned of the non-negligible constraints set by the wider socio-economic, financial as well as the policy and legal context within which the SNSP operates and strives to develop its strategy, achieve its objectives, and fulfil its mission in an increasingly more competitive national and regional environment. The most significant constraints are the following:

As the team specifically heard, such contextual constraints arise from the limited institutional autonomy, the excessive centralisation at the ministry level, heavily bureaucratic processes, as well as uncertainties in legal regulations and frequent changes of laws and regulations that affect the university's organisational stability and development profoundly. As an example,



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legal uncertainties have resulted in the temporal suspension of the SNSPA Senate, following a judicial judgment on an appeal challenging the legality of its composition. For that reason it was not possible for the IEP team to meet with the Senate and its thematic sub-committees during the evaluation visits.

The team also heard of the current financial constraints that have significantly reduced the possibility for institutional savings, as it was the case in the past. Such financial constraints arise mainly from the wider effects of the current economic crisis on public finances and the financial effects of the classification system of Romanian higher education institutions.

The team was told that such legal and financial constraints are further accentuated by the legal and financial restrictions on staff recruitment, due to the current public budgetary restrictions, but also the regulatory and bureaucratic restrictions on staff employment and, particularly, on visiting staff and recruitment of non-nationals. Such restrictions appear to be a considerable impediment to the development of a coherent teaching, research, administrative and technical staff recruitment policy with adequate staff profiles, and increase dependency on associate staff.

The team also learned of the pressures placed by the higher education system financial mechanisms used in Romania, as well as the ARACIS accreditation criteria for the allocation of study places for students in institutions (e.g. based on full-time staff only), shaping a — possibly unintended — context of disadvantageous incentives for higher education institutions. Specifically, as it was explained to the team, these funding policy mechanisms encourage the proliferation of small-scale Masters' programmes while, at the same time, obstruct necessary changes in the content of study programmes.

Similarly, the lack of formal recognition of lifelong learning programmes and funding incentives for their development leave these areas of institutional development without actual support.

Above all, the nationwide decrease in the number of students is to be taken into account. In the case of the SNSPA, as stated in the Managerial Programme of the former rector (page 14), the number of students has dropped from about 14,000 to 7,300 within a few years, i.e. between 2007/2008 and 2012. This is an alarming and challenging development, indeed.

The IEP team wishes to highlight these issues of contextual constraints (demographic change, legal uncertainties, policy framework, etc.) and their negative impact with regard to institutional direction and development, limiting the ability of SNSPA to plan and develop its strategies and actions, and its capacity for fostering change in key strategic areas of operation.

Governance, management and academic organisation

The SNSPA is a relatively small university specialised in the fields of administrative, political and social studies. It has four faculties (Political Sciences, Public Administration, Communication and Public Relations, and Management) and nine departments (Political



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Sciences, International Relations and European Integration, Sociology, Public Management, Communication, Law, Economy and Public Policies, Public Relations and Management) delivering nine full-time and two distance learning programmes at Bachelor level, about 30 full-time and 10 distance (low frequency) learning programmes, and four PhD programmes. All but one faculty have their own research centres (with a total of 10) linking research and educational activities.

Since 2009 the number of undergraduate students enrolled has decreased sharply, as part of the wider decrease of high school leavers and students in Romania. In the same period the number of Master-level students has increased over 7%. The SNSPA achieves a considerable completion rate of studies, with an average of over 80% full-time students at all levels of study, which – according to the experience of team members – is high in the field of social and political studies. It also achieves quite a satisfactory average time-to-graduation, with about 70% of Bachelor students graduating within the regular time required to complete their studies (three years). These figures, not unexpectedly, are lower in the case of students enrolled in distance learning programmes where dropout rates per education cycle exceed 50% at Bachelor level and 30% at Master level.

In the context of the financial, legal and policy constraints described above, the SNSPA has managerial, administrative and financial autonomy to conduct its own affairs, pursue its mission, vision, and values and develop its strategy, as described in the university's Charter.

The financial autonomy of the SNSPA is reflected in its sources of funding. As the IEP team learned the block grant it receives from the state represents about 32% of the university's income. The rest of the income comes from tuition fees, research contracts with national and international partners, EU structural funds, donations and sponsorships. As the team also learned, the classification of the SNSPA as a "teaching and research" university, as well as the suspension of competitive research and development funding since 2009, have severely restricted research income and opportunities to compete for funding in the national context. As a result, increasing institutional income from external sources has recently become more competitive and challenging.

Regarding institutional governance and the way the rector is selected, the SNSPA chose, through a referendum, to have the academic community, including student representatives, electing the rector, instead of appointing the rector following an external selection process. In the university's view, as stated in the SER, this option "shows that in our academic community more credit is given, now, to decisions adopted after consultation with colleagues".

As regards the de-facto processes and responsibilities taking place within the university's formal organisational structure and pattern of governance, the Senate – despite its composition being under juridical review – and its sub-committees play a central role while being supported by central administration and leadership, i.e. the rector, the vice-rectors, and the deans of the faculties. The team was told about the good communication flow between



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the Senate and the Board of Administration, the university's collective executive body at central level. It also heard of the important role played by the collegial and informal ways that "things happen" in the university and the interpersonal relations among its staff members that the size of the university facilitates. Student representatives also expressed their satisfaction and confirmed that, in general, their voice is "heard" by the university's administration and collective decision-making bodies.

In exploring the ways that the different faculties and units align their actions with the overall institutional mission, goals and strategy, the team learned about the wide acceptance of the managerial programme of the rector in place during the Team's first visit, reflected in his election with about 80% of the vote, as well as the new rector's main directions. The team also noted in discussions and meetings with academic staff of different faculties and units of the widely shared understanding and support of key institutional goals and objectives, with particular emphasis on the need to enhance the institution's research dimension and its international relevance and visibility, so as to enhance the overall research profile and classification of the SNSPA as an "advanced research" institution and a place for the education of national and regional elites.

However, the team has been left with some doubt about the overall handling by key institutional governance bodies of issues such as duplications across study programmes, the narrow specialisation of Masters' programmes and their proliferation, or the possibility for concentrating research interests of staff and setting research priorities at institutional level.

Strategic planning and organisational development

The IEP team focused on the SNSPA's planning and organisational agenda through exploring the process and key ideas for institutional development. The SER provided the team with only the Strategic Plan for the period 2008-2012. As the team heard during the first visit (in December 2012), deliberations for the formation and adoption of the new strategic plan were in progress and that it was planned to be finalised and adopted by March 2013. In the second visit (in June 2013) the team heard from the university top leadership the new strategic plan for the period 2013-2020 had not yet been finalised and adopted, given the change in the rectorate and the Senate's temporal suspension.

The IEP team, therefore, focused mainly on the process employed by the university in order to develop its Strategic Plan through discussions with, particularly, the university's central administration but also deans and vice-deans. The team sought to understand, in particular, the overall approach adopted by the university in the process of identifying a meaningful mission and vision – both of which need to extend beyond trivial statements –, setting realistic institutional objectives and selecting concrete strategic priorities for the strategic positioning of the university and its future development. The team examined whether certain process-related requirements in formulating the university's strategic plan were met.



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In the team's view, a meaningful process of strategic planning, which must arrive at substantial answers in order to be fit to serve a concrete process of implementation aimed at institutional and programmatic transformation, includes a thorough analysis of possible medium- and long-term effects of the changing student demographic trends in Romania, along with an analysis of the SNSPA's societal role and vision to be an education centre for the national elites with a wider regional relevance in the field of governance studies, and a sound and internationally visible and relevant research profile. It also includes an analysis of such high quality aspirations against their implications for the fee system, teaching and learning principles, objectives and methods, curriculum development, research agendas and priority setting, etc. Setting institutional objectives for the strategic positioning of the university also requires a well-grounded SWOT analysis, including both internal and external factors. Among these, in particular, there needs to be a "scan" of the wider environment, an analysis of challenges such as the digital age and internationalisation of higher education, an identification and analysis of alternative options, and different possible scenarios with resource requirements and possibilities for concentration of forces (for example, among different faculties and units), also taking into account competitors and their strategies, etc. Last but not least, there needs to be a clear analysis as to who SNSPA's "clients" are, especially in view of strengthening further education or research, and what the role of SNSPA could or should be in balancing a national mission and a role in international – or possibly regional – academia and realm of politics in the wider sense of the term.

The team learned of the bottom-up and collegial approach adopted for the development of the strategic plan and priorities, an approach that undoubtedly ensures a wide understanding and a sense of ownership by staff members. The team heard, however, different statements as to the availability of written operational plans with clear and concrete actions, and was left with some doubt about the concreteness and clearness required for its successful implementation and monitoring.

In exploring the means and processes employed to ensure a shared understanding and sense of ownership of the university's strategic plan, and the extent to which the different faculties, departments and units are aligned to that, the team heard that this mainly lies with the deans, vice-deans and heads of the departments and units, and that the central level would intervene, if necessary. Doubts, however, remain as to the effectiveness of such top-down, ex-post interventions, particularly in a context of an elected representative central administration. Moreover, the university should ensure that bottom-up processes do not mean undue fragmentation of policies and practices of faculties or other sub-units, which can, for instance, be seen in quality assurance approaches or study programme overlaps; instead, cooperative arrangements should be strengthened.

A meaningful and promising multiannual strategic planning process also includes working out operational plans with detailed actions to be taken annually, and at different levels (e.g. central-faculty level). The effective implementation of an organisation's strategic plan requires its "translation" into clear operational plans to the extent that there is a meaningful,



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concrete outline of specific and well-defined action lines, as well as measurable objectives, with valid indicators enabling progress to be monitored, if possible broken down on an annual basis. Such operational plans developed at central level and complemented with operational plans at faculty and unit level support and further enhance the alignment of different organisational units and structures to the university's overall strategy. Such management structures and processes constitute useful points of reference for benchmarking as well as for quality assessment and assurance of the institutions' governance and management structures. Although such operational plans were not readily available, the team formed the view that the university, and particularly its central administration, was fully aware of the importance and usefulness of such instruments. The team, however, heard different statements in meetings with staff about the availability of such operational plans of the past period strategic plan 2008-2012.

The team also considered the role played by the university's administrative services in the strategic planning and implementation process and in the alignment of faculty-level policies and practices to institutional level goals and objectives. It examined, in particular, the extent to which such central-level services provide effective information flow and quality professional support to faculty level, for example, on issues of teaching, learning, quality assurance, curriculum development and research. The team took note of the significant improvements in this area, as indicated by the work carried out by the Quality Assessment and Assurance Committee (CEAC), the gradual development of the Centre for Counselling and Vocational Guidance (CeCOP) into a university-wide centre, and the development of a central-level database on research. As there clearly exists considerable room for improvement in this area – for example, by enhancing feedback of CeCOP information into quality assurance processes for programmes – the team encourages the enhancement of the administration's role as a professional support service which provides high quality service capacity and effective information flow and support between central and faculty levels.

Effective strategic planning is also enhanced when strategic choices are enriched with the views, input and advice by external "stakeholders". The team explored, therefore, how and to what extent the SNSPA makes sure that strategic choices are enriched by external views. Although the SNSPA staff has connections, networks and collaborations with external national and international organisations, as well as other higher education institutions, such external input is not institutionalised in the form, for example, of an "advisory group" of externals or a "board of trustees". The SNSPA may consider the expediency of such institutionalised forms of communication, be it at central level or in a decentralised mode at faculty or department levels.

The overall conclusion of the IEP team about institutional governance is that the strategic planning process employed by the SNSPA, and progress made with regard to analysis, strategic choices, priority setting, implementation and monitoring, are a first step in the right direction that needs to be further enhanced, enriched and worked out, before a coherent,



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meaningful and effective strategic plan, which would be able to give tangible and meaningful results, is finalised and adopted.



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3. Teaching and learning

The SNSPA's self-evaluation report defines the university's educational mission as: "training elite specialists in political, administrative, social communication and economic sciences" with a priority for ensuring graduates' competitiveness in the labour market, along with continuing education and distance learning opportunities for those already in the labour market. It has, therefore, set as an educational goal the "training of professionals who are able to contribute, through their knowledge, in the design and management of public policies within state institutions, in the development of international relations of the country, in business organisations and management in private companies, in optimising communication and in building the image of the country or company".

The team noted that the SNSPA organises and offers study programmes at all three levels (Bachelor, Master, and PhD) and that the provision is extensive and diverse, particularly at Master's level. The university also offers distance learning and part-time courses as well as continuing education programmes. The IEP team learned that the SNSPA has aspirations to further expand provision at Master's level as well as to certify and expand its lifelong learning programmes. The Department for Continuing Education is, therefore, in the process of undergoing national accreditation.

As part of the strategic objective to enhance its international visibility, the university also organises study programmes at Master's level in foreign languages. Five of them are taught in English, one is bilingual (Romanian and French) while two of them are organised in collaboration with other European universities. It also organises student exchanges, and invites professionals, and international academics to lecture and teach.

As previously mentioned, the SNSPA has received the highest rate (*High Degree of Confidence*) by ARACIS. The team also learned that the university has established a Committee for Quality Assessment and Assurance (CEAC) that is responsible for assessing the quality of study programmes, teaching and learning and reports on these matters to the university Senate. CEAC has produced an important and useful document entitled "The strategic plan for quality assessment and assurance of SNSPA", which sets criteria and standards for internally assuring and assessing the quality of study programmes, teaching strategies, learning resources, and services to students, as well as the assessment and certification of learning outcomes.

The team took note of the internships organised by the university aimed at enhancing student employability, student active learning processes through projects, and problem-based learning activities, as well as coursework and assignments enhancing academic writing, research skills, critical thinking and self-management. However, the team heard conflicting statements from students of different departments/faculties, particularly about how succinctly – or loosely – their internship experiences relate to their study experiences. As for the quality policy, it is desirable for the university to address a more coherent practice with regard to student internships, throughout the entire university.



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The team also heard that the internal institutional criteria set for quality assessment and assurance were wider than ARACIS' requirements. The documents provided to the team, however, did not make clear — or did not make sufficiently explicit — the specific notion of “quality”, that the SNSPA has adopted and aspires to develop and enhance, assess and assure. Is it about pursuing excellence? Is it about “fitness of purpose” and “fitness for purpose”? Are there specific general education objectives to be met across faculties and programmes? To what extent and how is the personal development of students and democratic citizenship objectives being pursued across study programmes, as part of the institutions' policy and educational objectives? Are there any wider social objectives pursued by the university's policy such as social inclusion and broadening of student access? Discussions and meetings during visits, however, did not make it possible to clarify the university's thinking and reflection on such educational concepts and objectives, and their implications for institutional policy and practice.

In such a rather vague context in terms of concrete educational objectives and institutional strategy for teaching and learning, the team found that “employability” issues with regard to study programme development, curriculum design, competence development, quality assessment and assurance were not explored in systematic ways. Employers' and alumni views and experiences were not collected systematically. A learning outcomes approach appears to be in place, but the team is unclear whether such an approach is fully applied in a coherent and integrated way across the institution, its faculties, departments, and in all stages of the process, i.e. initiation, design, operation, student assessment, and quality assurance of study programmes.

The team also explored how the SNSPA's teaching and learning policy and practice relate to the overall institutional mission, vision and strategy, contributing to building the university's own integrated institutional profile and identity. However, the team observed gaps in these institutional policy links. For example, although the SNSPA has set as a strategic objective to enhance its research profile and be classified as an advanced research university, it has not fully addressed the implications and links of this objective to the university's educational objectives. It has not fully addressed the educational implications in developing the “research mind” of undergraduate students in particular. Nor has it fully addressed teaching and learning implications of the strategic objective to enhance its international visibility and regional relevance and to be transformed into “an elite university at regional level in the field of governance studies.” Finally, the SNSPA aspires to offer programmes which are “practical”, which need to be developed as a concept, beyond providing internships, e.g. by strengthening concepts of problem-based learning as a teaching and learning approach as much as possible. Whether or not and to which extent such concepts – and, generally speaking, a learning outcome approach – are in place was difficult for the team to ascertain since there were conflicting statements in various interviews held by the team. All in all, mission aspirations, and educational objectives in general, may need to be explored much more deeply, seeing them as more than “buzz words” but rather as meaningful, substantial concepts which can be



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translated operationally into tangible learning outcomes and real student experiences. This, in effect, would also be essential to achieve in order to fully redeem SNSPA's claim to excellence in teaching and learning.

In examining the human resources and staff development policy of the university with regard to enhancing quality of teaching, the team found a rather weak approach, based mainly on person-to-person discussion of issues, lacking a systematic approach to support staff in their teaching methods and activities, and in study programme development, curriculum design, and student assessment. While "quality professionals", able to identify and "challenge" study programme educational objectives in all stages of programme development (design-implementation-reviewing and assessment) by the university's academic staff, are lacking, the team did not hear plans to address such a need.

Furthermore, the team took note of an imbalance of emphasis assigned by the university to the enhancement of its educational activities.. The information base on educational activities is not as developed as it is for staff members' research activities, and incentives or awards for achievements in teaching by staff members and learning by students are not in place. Raising awareness and supporting staff members in maintaining a fair balance between their teaching and research activity is required to maintain high educational standards while increasing research activity.

The team also explored internal processes that the university has developed and put in place to assess its teaching and learning performance and outcomes. It found that the questionnaires to students are widely focused on individual modules, and they are not standardised across the institutions. A focus on overall programmes is therefore also needed, in order to assess, for example, admission, progression, course sequencing, assessment practices, student experience with regard to student support in the wider sense of the term, etc. As the team learned, a mandatory and university-wide standardised questionnaire is being put in place this year. Such a questionnaire also needs to be guided by the university's overarching educational concepts and objectives to assess, for example, the institution's aspiration for "excellence" or "fitness of purpose". As the team also heard, there is some process in place for the evaluation of student internships, but it is not applied in a coherent and systematic way across programmes. All in all, the team therefore believes that there is scope for developing a more coherent, standardised approach to quality assurance practices throughout the university, while this recommendation does not mean to exclude differentiation where there is real need for it.

The team also took note of the important work carried out by the Centre for Counselling and Vocational Guidance (CeCOP), and its gradual upgrading within the institution. Apart, however, from tracking graduates' employment records, which the SNSPA is undertaking, it is also essential, on the one hand, for the university to explore and analyse the employers' views on competences needed and obtaining their feedback in a sustainable and more systematic way. On the other hand, it is also important to improve study programme and



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curriculum development to ensure that employers' expectations and needs are also met. To this end, closer communication and cooperation between the Centre for Counselling and Vocational Guidance and the Committee for Quality Assessment and Assurance could be considered by the university. To the same effect the introduction of an external examiner system and a peer review process for the evaluation of study programmes might be useful to develop, along with employing in-house professionals in quality assurance to identify and challenge the validity of study programme objectives in the process of their development or reviewing.

In the examination of the quality enhancement practice, the team noted that the university relied largely on person-to-person discussion of issues that may have arisen, while there is little systematic support for staff development. As for programme improvement in terms of institutionalised policy and practice, there seems to be little emphasis on (re)considering adequacy of educational objectives of programmes, adequacy of intended learning outcomes and assessment practices to fit these objectives, and accuracy of programme compilation.



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4. Research

The research mission of the SNSPA, as stated in the SER, aims at “enabling SNSPA to become an important player in the investigation of processes and phenomena that can be observed in the Romanian society”. Research activities are carried out by research centres and the doctoral school. Research centres are autonomous units attached to different faculties and departments; some of them play an active role in the national public sphere, enhancing the visibility of the university. After its classification as a “teaching and research” institution the SNSPA has reassessed its overall research strategy and policy, taking into account that increasing its research competitiveness is vital for reaching the first category of institutions of “advanced research and education”.

In enhancing the university’s research profile and addressing research activity as a strategic priority, it has in recent years developed a series of policy measures including an increase in the number of research centres, expanding the doctoral school, and involving students more in the research process. In an adverse context of decreasing funding for research in the national context, it has also strived to concentrate resources, enhance its international visibility and improve internal communication and awareness about the importance of research and the institution’s aspirations. The data presented to the team confirmed positive results of the university research strategy with, in particular, growing numbers of international publications and PhD papers presented at conferences. Current planning of the university also includes the reallocation of expenditure from infrastructure to research, after the completion of building its new premises. The team’s discussions and meetings with staff confirmed their awareness across departments and faculties of the high priority the institution assigns to research and international visibility.

As the team learned, the university has developed and agreed a set of about 25 research areas as core areas and the institution’s research priorities, while the SNSPA does not see such focusing as excluding other research priorities and agendas that individual staff members may have. In exploring the process for the identification of those research areas, the team learned that a bottom-up approach was employed, involving all academic staff. However, while the team appreciates such a democratic process for its merits of ownership and inclusion, it also expresses its concern for such a bottom-up approach. If employed as a single method, this approach may not be well suited to take into account, as much as it is required, the external environment, societal interest, funding opportunities, risks involved, and other competitors’ strategies, while competing for funds with them. It may also not take into account possibilities for collaborations with externals or for cross-faculty opportunities for in-house concentration of forces, aiming at developing critical mass or possibilities for concentration on real strengths and areas of excellence.

The SNSPA incentivises research. It has, for example, introduced a specific funding scheme, from the institution’s own income, providing research grants and support for travel and



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participation to conferences related to the priority research areas. The overall salary of staff depends on the assessment of their individual research performance.

The university also invests on a series of print journals in English to increase international visibility, and encourages its staff to publish in these journals. It is, however, questionable whether print journals should be chosen rather than IT-based and open access publishing. In either case, quality scrutiny is needed and an international peer-review of publications is a necessity. The SNSPA should concentrate more strongly on having publications in international journals rather than in-house series.

As for quality assurance and quality enhancement in research, the university's central management, as the team learned, is also aware of the need to evaluate research centres as it is also envisaged in the university's paper "The strategic plan for quality assessment and assurance of SNSPA". Progress has been made in monitoring research in that the SNSPA has set up an information database at central university level, collecting extensive and rich information about the research activities of research centres and individual staff members; however, it was unclear as to how these data are being used to support institutional policy and research strategy, beyond the mere assessment of individual staff performance. Despite this development, the overall methodology for an evaluation of research is not developed yet. As the team heard, the institution is itself fully aware of the lack of such a unitary tool to monitor the research activity of its research units. It is also aware of the need for alignment of research centres, doctoral studies programmes and priority research areas, if a more integrated and coherent institutional policy and strategy aimed at increasing the institution's research competitiveness is to be developed.

In the view of the IEP team, the overall approach of the SNSPA's research strategy relies heavily on individual evaluation and personalised incentives (e.g. grants, salaries) rather than on an integrated and coherent institutional research strategy that would be based more on institutional strengths (i.e. based on evidence collected by a systematic and thorough interpretation of data collected within the university and in the external environment). In the IEP team's view it is for the SNSPA to address and answer in concrete and tangible ways a) whether the "bottom-up" approach to research priority setting is sufficient, and b) whether identifying fewer but strategically valid and important research areas is preferable, also based on a forecast of societal needs and academic challenges and subsequent strategic decisions steered to a larger extent by means of "top-down" processes, a choice that naturally contains elements of "hard" decisions to be taken.



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5. Service to society

In exploring matters related to the SNSPA's research, education and other external activities, the IEP team focused on the question of the university's strategy to ensure the responsiveness of its services to the needs of the broader society.

The team learned about the active involvement of the university's staff members in the national public sphere and debates. It also learned about the public communication of science through civic activities of, in particular, some of its research centres. It has also taken note of the involvement of its staff in research and development projects and in consultancy activities of national government, national agencies, and international organisations active in Romania. Discussions with externals also confirmed the good reputation that its professionals and the university have built, thus fulfilling the expectations associated with its initial foundation in the beginning of the 1990s. Documentation presented to the team also confirmed the good employment prospects of the SNSPA's graduates not only in the public but also in the private sector and, even more, in organisations abroad.

The team also took note of the continuing education programmes and its part-time delivery of courses offered by the SNSPA that facilitate access to different categories of students. It also took note of the university's priority to further expand its lifelong learning programmes and to develop e-learning opportunities, thus widening access to a broader set of students.

The gradual upgrading of the Centre for Counselling and Vocational Guidance within the institution and the expansion of its research work is a positive development, a positive step in the systematic and evidence-based exploration of the educational needs of employers and society at large. In the IEP team's view, such mechanisms could be more effective if they were complemented with a more systematic and thorough exploration and analysis of employers' views, in terms of competences of graduates needed and a more systematic reflection on curriculum from perspectives related to the issue of employability of graduates.

In terms of the university's strategic planning, the team took note of the rector's managerial programme reference to the need for the establishment of "a permanent dialogue with society" as a strategic objective of the university in the coming years. However, in examining the ways that the university has put in place to ensure that the wider society's views are taken into account and the role of external stakeholders in decision-making, particularly, strategic decisions, the team found weaknesses in that this strategic objective was not specific in terms of providing concrete operational steps to its achievement.

In the view of the IEP team, the establishment of a more permanent advisory board, a "board of trustees", at the institutional level would also be to the university's benefit. Such an institutionalisation of the role and influence of third parties would help in improving responsiveness and would enhance the links between the SNSPA's strategic positioning, priority-setting, planning and future institutional development and the needs and



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expectations of society at large and, in particular, sectors of society, which the SNSPA should support by means of specific programmes or focused research.



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6. Quality culture

The university's quality management, assessment and assurance, and the development and presence of a well-embedded quality culture were also of interest to the IEP team. Therefore, it took note of the university's Committee for Quality Assessment and Assurance (CEAC), working under the general responsibility of the rectorate and the approval of the Senate, and of the sub-committees supporting the implementation of quality assessment and assurance processes at the faculty level.

Quality assurance and accreditation of study programmes and institutions are subject to national criteria and procedures set by Romania's national agency, ARACIS. As the team learned, the SNSPA, through its staff and projects, has been actively involved and contributed to the development and implementation of the national quality assurance policy frameworks in Romania. It also learned that all the SNSPA's study programmes have been subject to quality controls and that in 2009 the university was rated by ARACIS as an institution of *High Degree of Confidence*, the highest possible rate. The team also took note of the accreditation of the SNSPA's programmes by international agencies, signalling the university's confidence of its educational standards and growing international visibility.

The team's enquiries focused, therefore, on the SNSPA's internal processes to ascertain that the university had well-established quality processes in place, extended beyond external requirements, contributing to embedding an institutional culture of quality and continuous improvement.

The team took note, in particular, of the CEAC's document entitled "The strategic plan for quality assessment and assurance of SNSPA", an important document developed in 2008, as part of the university's strategic plan and priorities of the period 2008-2012 and, as stated in the SER, still in force. The document constitutes an elaborate and coherent institutional strategy for the development of an internal "system" for quality assessment and assurance, including a definition of tasks and responsibilities of bodies and structures, methods and processes of evaluation, criteria, standards and indicators for evaluation, areas and subjects to be evaluated, evaluation databases, and use of evaluation results.

Different statements by staff and students, and time constraints during the evaluation visits have not allowed the team to form a full picture of the implementation of the university's strategy plan for quality assurance presented in the above-mentioned strategy document. The team, however, did take note of certain gaps in the implementation of the university's quality strategy. For example, an instrument for the evaluation of research centres has not yet been developed although a rich database for research activities has been created at central university level. The quality assessment of different governing and management units, structures, and services is not yet a regular practice within the university. Gaps were also present with respect to the evaluation and quality assurance processes of teaching and



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learning where the team sees scope for developing more coherent, standardised policies and practices (see more in section 3).

The team also noted that carrying out the university's quality work relies heavily and predominantly on academic staff involvement. The university is thus lacking the role of "quality professionals" who, thanks to their specific competences, would get involved more proactively and at early stages of developing or revising study programmes, and help academics to make use of specific aspects of quality as early as possible. Such an approach would make it possible to shift the view on quality issues from ex-post checking to ex-ante conceptualisations, in collaboration with academics and students of the academic field and related practitioners or employers in question. In the view of the team, bringing the Centre of Counselling and Vocational Guidance closer to the CEAC structure, expanding their roles and tasks, and supporting them with professional staff would be of significant help in filling in the implementation gaps of the institution's quality strategy, improving its overall quality management, enhancing the university's evidence-based strategic planning decisions, and supporting its continuous improvement.

The team also considered the students' role and involvement in quality processes, and in wider institutional governance arrangements. The team took care to ensure that students were provided with opportunities to indicate whether they were well represented, whether their views were sufficiently "heard" in collective governing bodies and were taken on board by the institution's executive. The team learned that students were, in general, satisfied with the formal and informal opportunities and channels of communication with the university's governing and decision-making bodies, and that they were able to raise matters of concern to them. It also appeared to the team that students were satisfied overall with their teachers and staff, as they were accessible and helpful to them. However, the team took note of different statements from students with regard to their opportunities to provide feedback, apparently, as a result of the implementation gaps of student questionnaires, across faculties and study programmes.

In the team's overall assessment and view, after examining the university's quality management arrangements there is clear evidence of quality culture at present, with strong elements of even further enhancement found in the way that the SNSPA is being governed and offers its services to students and the wider society. The open communicative approach to quality management with documents and reports, and the blend of bottom-up and top-down processes of communication and decision-making put in place ensure the involvement of staff and students and broad awareness and ownership of decisions with regard to quality issues. The overall awareness about substantive and "technical" issues related to quality assurance, learning outcomes and quality culture are also strong aspects of the university's quality culture. The strongest element in the development of a quality culture is the openness of its staff, their awareness of the importance of managing the institution's quality and the self-critical and self-reflexive stance they have taken, not only in the SER, but also in meetings and discussions with the IEP team.



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7. Internationalisation

The IEP team noted the importance attached by the SNSPA to the international and European dimension of its activities. This importance is reflected at the top of the institution, in the responsibilities and tasks of the vice-rector in charge of international relations (along with social activities of students) that has oversight of the university's international relations and activities at senior management level. However, this strong focus on internationalisation is, at first glance, dampened by the fact that the university did not have an internet presence through a website in English.

The team learned that, although there is no strategy document or operational plan for the internationalisation of the university, the international and European dimension are among strategic considerations and is addressed in various ways by the university and its faculties. The team also took note of the strategic objectives of the SNSPA to be transformed into "an elite university at regional level in the field of governance studies" and to enhance its research profile by enhancing the international visibility and relevance of its research activities (see on this section 4).

From documentation presented and meetings with staff and students the team confirmed the awareness of the SNSPA community and the importance assigned to research and educational activities with an international and European dimension. It also observed that the university prides itself for its graduates being employed by international and European organisations abroad. The team learned that the university has developed links, partnerships and collaborations with international institutions, invites international academics and professionals, organises exchange schemes, offers educational programmes in foreign languages and double degrees with other European universities (see also in section 3). The team also learned of the financial and bureaucratic constraints the university faces in developing international activities, the financial difficulties outgoing students face in participating in student exchanges and the language barriers of incoming students in Romania. Two of the university's study programmes (one Bachelor and one Master level) have been accredited by international agencies.

The IEP team members formed the view that these important international activities and links established at faculty and department levels or undertaken by individual staff, through bilateral agreements, partnerships and exchanges add considerable value in terms of education and research experiences, for both staff and students, directly or indirectly. They also gradually contribute to building the international profile and enhance visibility of a relatively new university such as the SNSPA is.

It is important, however, that at central level the university sets certain strategic priorities and criteria for choices and support offered to the international activities and relations undertaken by its faculties/departments, research centres and individual staff. As part of the university's strategic plan, a coherent, systematic and integrated strategy for internationalisation is, therefore, needed, aligned to the university's wider research and



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education strategies and its future development. SNSPA should be more focused in judging whether or not certain international activities offer effective value added to its teaching or research agenda, thus helping both its international relevance and its capacity to perform even better in teaching and in research by means of clustering, which should, for example, also be linked to a strategy aiming at the development of more joint programmes or institutionalised collaborative research activities.

In the team's view the effective implementation of such an internationalisation strategy would also require incentives and awards of achievements for faculties/departments and individuals, while the successful monitoring of progress in this area of institutional policy also requires setting measurable objectives and developing the respective indicators.



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Conclusion and recommendations

The recommendations of the IEP team relate to issues with a direct bearing on the aspiration of the SNSPA to be “an elite university at regional level in the field of governance studies”. The team’s recommendations summarized hereafter (while further recommendations on specific details can be found throughout the report) have been reached after full consideration of the structures and processes which underpin the university’s operations and of its capacity for bringing forward change.

Governance and institutional decision-making

- The team encourages the university to continue its work and deliberations for the development of the university’s Strategic Plan, “scanning” better the university’s wider environment at national and regional level, analysing risks, opportunities and the competitor’s strategies, analysing thoroughly and addressing wider challenges and trends and their implications for the university’s future institutional development, such as the student demographic decline in Romania, the digital age, internationalisation of higher education and their effects for the institutions’ future development as an elite university at regional level.
- The team also recommends that the strategic planning process, which the university is currently involved in, is complemented with detailed operational plans, including focused priorities, concrete, clear and measurable objectives, detailed action lines, realistic timescales, with valid indicators for their systematic monitoring of performance against plans and targets — where possible — on an annual basis. It would be useful if such operational plans were supplemented by similar operational plans for each faculty, structure, administrative unit or service, identifying and defining in detail their distinctive roles and contributions to the fulfilment of the university’s strategic objectives.
- The team encourages the university to be more proactive in discussing its strategic priorities and objectives with representatives of the wider society and external stakeholders, and in particular future employers of the university’s graduates. It also encourages the university to take specific steps for the institutionalisation of such links and interactions with external stakeholders in the possible form of an advisory group or a “board of trustees”.

Teaching and learning

- The team encourages the university to further develop its thinking and reflection with regard to its institution-wide educational concepts and objectives, thus developing its own notion and meaning of “quality” in education, and enhancing its institutional profile, distinctiveness and identity as an elite institution. The university’s quality



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assessments and assurance processes and criteria for its education programmes would also move beyond procedural (and as such “technical”) matters and issues and be adjusted to these educational concepts and objectives, ensuring the continuous improvement of the university’s educational offer.

- In developing, designing, reviewing and assessing study programmes, curricula and internship programmes, more attention needs to be given to issues related to the meaningful interpretation of the employability of graduates and competences needed in the labour market, which would then need to be translated into adequate intended learning outcomes that fit study programme design. The team encourages the university to systematically collect, explore and analyse the views of employers on these important matters. It also encourages the university to ensure that its approach to the concept, development and assessment of learning outcomes is consistent with European practices, as expressed in the Bologna Process.
- The team encourages the university to fill in gaps in institutional policy, ensuring the integration of its educational objectives to its wider strategic objectives. Examples for this include the need for the university to enhance research-based teaching in Bachelor programmes, and develop the “research mind” and respective competences of its students, thus enhancing its overall institutional profile as an “advanced research and education” institution.
- The university is also encouraged to develop a database at central level collecting information on its educational programmes, teaching and learning activities, thus building a knowledge base for the monitoring of progress based on evidence.
- The university might also find useful to consider introducing incentives for individual as well as institutional performance and achievements in teaching and learning, thus ensuring an appropriate balance of incentives for staff between research and teaching, ensuring the quality of both.

Research

- The team encourages the university to re-examine its strategy for research and, in particular, the number of core research areas identified through the bottom-up approach employed, with the view to concentrate its forces and resources more on institutional strengths and, if needs, to take “hard” decisions on these matters. Such strengths across faculties and research centres become clear through a systematic and thorough analysis of the research data collected at central university level. In addition, there should be a systematic forecast of environmental factors, especially of societal needs as well as academic challenges and opportunities.
- To the same effect, the university is also encouraged to develop the instrument required for the evaluation of research centres, and also set incentives linked to the performance of institutional units and research centres.



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Service to society

- The team encourages the university to establish an advisory board or a “board of trustees”, at institutional level to benefit from the views and expectations of external “stakeholders” and improve the university’s responsiveness to the changing needs of the wider society it aspires to serve and meet.
- The university is also encouraged to reflect more on issues related to the employability of its graduates and the fitness of its educational programmes for that purpose, by collecting, analysing, and interpreting in adequate and scientifically sound methods, the views of employers, particularly, in terms of competences needed.

Quality culture

- The team encourages the university to ensure that the institution’s strategy for quality is fully implemented, filling in the remaining gaps. There is also a need for the university to consider the revision of the institution’s quality strategy, also taking into account the experience gained in implementing the strategy adopted in 2008.
- As part of filling in the implementation gaps in its quality strategy, the university is encouraged to ensure that assessing the institutions’ governing and management structures, units, and processes becomes a regular practice in the university’s life.
- The university is encouraged to further reflect and reconsider its quality assessment and assurance strategy, moving beyond procedural and technical processes, focusing also on the evaluation of the educational objectives, learning outcomes and competences development.
- In the view of the team, the institution’s quality and culture could be further enhanced if appropriate measures were taken to involve more “quality professionals” in the work and deliberations of the Committee for Quality Assessment and Assurance (CEAC), effectively linked to the Centre for Counselling and Vocational Guidance and its expertise, and supporting academics as well as informing decisions and deliberations of institutional governance and management bodies with evidence and professional knowledge and expertise. The university might also find it useful to consider developing a tailor-made educational programme (as a lifelong learning programme or a Master’s level programme) for the upgrading of competences of professional staff in universities and other higher education institutions. Such an educational programme (that could be offered in collaboration with a department of educational sciences in Romania) might fill in a shortage of competences also needed in other universities in Romania and the wider region, that are seeking to modernise their institutional quality management and governance.



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Internationalisation

- The team encourages the university to develop a coherent and integrated strategy for its internationalisation, as part of its current strategic planning, including clear and concrete objectives and priorities, linked with the overall strategic educational and research strategic priorities and objectives, thus ensuring that the institutions' internationalisation strategy complements and contributes to the strategic objectives of the university and its future institutional development as an elite institution at a regional level. For such an internationalisation strategy to be successful it also needs to provide for incentives to individual staff and its institutional structures and awards for distinctive achievements, also including criteria for evaluation and indicators for monitoring progress.



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Envoi

The IEP team wishes to thank the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration of Romania for the excellent arrangements made in preparation for their visits, for all the support provided to the team for their work, and for the gracious hospitality and welcome. The team has enjoyed meetings and open and frank discussions with the SNSPA's staff, students and external stakeholders. It had the pleasure to learn about the distinctive features of the SNSPA, the current challenges the university faces and the determination to address and overcome them. The team hopes that the university finds their comments and recommendations helpful and supportive in its planning for the future. The team believes that the SNSPA has the ambition, potential, and capacity for self-reflection to be truly successful in its current plans and future development and is convinced that the SNSPA will be playing an important and significant role in its field, both in Romania and beyond. The new, sizeable building which, the team heard, was near completion at the time of the team's last visit will undoubtedly help the SNSPA in enhancing its role both nationally and internationally to an even greater extent. In accomplishing its aspirations, the team wishes the SNSPA well.