



BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM INSPECTION (International HE)

INSTITUTION: VUZF University

ADDRESS: 1 Gusla Str
Ovcha Kupel District
1618 Sofia
Bulgaria

HEAD OF INSTITUTION: Professor Grigorii Vazov

Accreditation status: Accredited

Date of inspection: 31 March 2014

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION ON ACCREDITATION: Accreditation continued 10 July 2014

PART A - INTRODUCTION

1. Background to the institution

VUZF is a private university situated on the outskirts of Sofia. Its major academic teaching and research is centred on the areas of economics, insurance, finance, information technology and innovation management. The University was founded in 2002 by special resolution of the National Assembly. Approval was granted on the basis that the University would offer undergraduate courses in economics. In 2008 the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation granted institutional approval for a period of six years and a year later approved all of its programmes and in addition permitted the University to offer courses at Masters level. Institutional recognition followed one year later by programme approval is standard practice in Bulgaria. The University's academic reputation was further enhanced in 2010 and 2011 when it entered into collaborative double degree arrangements with the University of Sheffield. The Sheffield courses offered by VUZF are overseen by the University of Sheffield International Faculty, City College, Thessaloniki. University of Sheffield International Faculty has BAC accreditation. The senior management at VUZF believes that the acquisition of BAC accreditation advances its international ambitions for collaboration with other UK and European universities.

2. Brief description of the current provision

All academic provision is at degree and postgraduate levels with the awarding bodies being VUZF University and the University of Sheffield. In total there are 19 courses that lead to VUZF degrees and seven leading to Sheffield awards. It also offers ancillary courses, for example in English language, which are non-award bearing. Undergraduate and postgraduate courses may be studied on a full-time, part-time or distance learning basis. The Sheffield courses are taught in English, the remaining courses in Bulgarian and part English. Students on the Sheffield undergraduate courses have to complete their studies in Thessaloniki. They study for three years in Sofia and one year in Greece. The majority of teaching on the Sheffield programmes is carried out by University of Sheffield International Faculty staff. There are approximately 1300 students currently enrolled on the University's degree programmes. Approximately 60% study on a part-time basis, 30% are full-time students and 10% study via distance learning.

3. Inspection process

The inspection was carried out by one inspector. In advance of the inspection, the inspector had established contact with a member of administrative staff at the University and this had proved to be very helpful. It was clear that the staff of the University were prepared to fully co-operate with the inspection. The inspector met with senior managerial, academic and administrative staff and had an informal meeting with a representative group of students from the various undergraduate programmes. In addition, the inspector was given a tour of the premises and was able to access documentation as required. The staff at the University were very helpful throughout the inspection.

4. Inspection history

IHE Full inspection: 14 and 15 March 2013

PART B – JUDGEMENTS AND EVIDENCE

The following judgements and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector(s) during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution

1. Significant changes since the last inspection

(If there has been a change of premises which has not been reported on previously, please include a full report on the new premises)

The only significant change since the last inspection is that the University has reduced the number of courses it offers leading to its own award from 22 at the time of the full inspection to 19 at the time of the interim inspection.

2. Response to actions points in last report

There were no action points; there were seven recommendations in the last report:

The University's student selection process be kept under review.

VUZF seeks students with the capacity to achieve a high level of performance. To this end, it has established relationships with 30 schools across the country which specialise in economics. Staff and prospective students from these schools are invited to attend VUZF to experience the educational environment. In addition, seminars are organised for staff from the schools which are located in the south east region of the country. On arrival, new students are given the opportunity to have extra lessons in academic writing, communication skills and business etiquette and the VUZF disciplinary processes. The University seeks to cultivate a real interest in the students and their performance. This last point was verified by the students during the meeting held with them.

The University clarifies its research policy to include benchmarks and timelines prior to the next National Assessment and Accreditation visit in 2014.

The NAA Institutional Accreditation visit actually took place in late December 2013. At the time of the BAC interim inspection, VUZF was awaiting the outcome of the NAA Institutional Accreditation inspection. At the NAA visit, VUZF presented its research strategy which is to focus on five areas: economics, finance, insurance, IT and innovation management. University academic staff have been invited to join one or more of these focus areas to pursue research. The aim is to stimulate enthusiasm to carry out research and to publish. VUZF enables its staff to carry out research by giving staff no more than 360 hours of face-to-face teaching each academic year. Plans are drawn up for conferences to be attended throughout the year and for staff to present papers at them. The research which is carried out is applied and close to the needs of Bulgarian businesses. The day after the BAC interim inspection, a group of VUZF staff were travelling to Copenhagen to deliver a paper as part of a European Union funded project conference workshop.

Consideration might be given to extending the current annual review procedures for the VUZF degree courses to include external assessors, who could advise on whether the programme meets relevant European undergraduate and postgraduate standards.

VUZF follows the requirements of the labour market and discusses the contents of its programmes with businesses operating in Bulgaria. Representatives from business are invited to provide advice on programme content. Feedback from City College (Thessaloniki) and the University of Sheffield is included within VUZF's annual review process. In addition, a number of its own staff teach at other Bulgarian institutions as well as having close links with local businesses.

Consideration might be given to having a more formalised appraisal system linked to staff development.

Each semester, students complete a written questionnaire (anonymously) which provides evaluation of their lecturers in terms of their knowledge of the subject, presentation skills, communication and accessibility. The evaluations are discussed with the lecturers concerned by senior staff and action taken as necessary. The results of the evaluation are discussed by VUZF's academic board at which measures for improvement are determined. Informal annual appraisal takes place and a detailed review is conducted every three years for junior academic staff and every five years for senior academics.

Students would benefit from typed feedback on assignments rather than handwritten.

A new platform has now been introduced giving on-line communication and feedback to students.

To consider whether existing teaching practice activities could be consolidated to provide a VUZF teacher training programme with a University award for those successfully completing the course, aimed for staff without formal teaching qualifications.

No in-house teacher training programme has been introduced but classroom observation is taking place on a regular basis. Feedback to the academic staff member from the observer is provided on a confidential basis.

To develop a second marking policy for VUZF programmes.

All students' assessments are blind second marked. At the end of the semester the first and second markers compare their two sets of marks and arrive at a conclusion on a final mark.

3. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements – spot check

3.1 Management, Staffing and Administration

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments VUZF is very student orientated in its management. It has an active careers centre with two full-time support staff. Independent evidence from the Bulgarian National Insurance office indicates that 90% of VUZF graduates have found appropriate employment, much of which is due to the efforts of the staff at VUZF. The structure of the University is clearly defined and managed by appropriately qualified staff. It was evident that there are clear channels of communication between management and staff and indeed between staff and students. This was confirmed by the students. The institution does conduct systematic regular reviews of its overall performance as it is required to do by the NAA and the University of Sheffield.				

3.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments There is clear academic leadership in each of the academic programmes offered and the Deputy Rector of Educational Activities and Quality Management is suitably qualified (PhD). There is an appraisal procedure although classroom observation is not part of the formal process as its results are confidential. However, regular formal and informal student feedback is practised and students confirmed that action is taken when improvements are identified. Two comments made by students, who were very positive on the whole, is that				

some of the IT hardware in some rooms is not of a sufficient standard to facilitate full use of IT interactive presentations, such as downloads from YouTube, and that the library itself is rather small. Both these comments were fed back by the inspector to the Executive Director. The second comment relating to the library is less of an issue as more and more material is brought on-line giving students remote access. The inspector's view during the tour, was that the library itself was actually of a reasonable size to accommodate the number of students at VUZF.

3.3 Student Welfare

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✓			
<p>Comments The students confirmed that VUZF is extremely student orientated with highly effective communication systems and an effective method of collecting and acting on student opinion. There are in fact few international students studying at VUZF. Those who have been recruited emanate from Turkey, Macedonia and Russia. The Bulgarian Government's strict visa system discourages overseas student recruitment. One concern expressed by the students was that they felt the prices in the on-site café, which is managed by an out-sourced organisation, tend to be rather higher than those charged in the town. This comment was brought to the Executive Director's attention.</p>				

3.4 Premises and Facilities

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✓			
<p>Comments VUZF's accommodation is very modern, clean and extremely tidy. There is 24 hour security for the building and access to the stairs is via a reception desk which is supervised. The classrooms and learning facilities are appropriate for the courses offered. Students on the University of Sheffield programmes have access to their own library which is stocked with appropriate material. Staff accommodation is well set out and the inspector had no feeling of anyone being cramped in the office accommodation. The classrooms are well laid out and there is good circulation space.</p>				

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

Institution's strengths

The strengths of the University as presented in the IHE full inspection report are re-presented here as they are clearly still relevant:

MANAGEMENT, STAFFING AND ADMINISTRATION

- * Very experienced, supportive and proactive senior management team.
- * Highly motivated administrative/support staff.
- * 'Cohesive' working practices avoiding a rigid distinction between administrative and academic staff and goal orientated.
- * Extremely well qualified academic staff.
- * Excellent administrative systems. First class data collection and monitoring systems.
- * Excellent website with virtual tour provision. First class course brochures and advertising material.
- * Central role played by the Academic Council in the development of the University.
- * Recognition of the importance of international links. Very successful programmes to date with Sheffield University.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

- * Good quality learning environment.
- * Well-resourced learning environment with a strong commitment to on-line learning.
- * Well planned courses which are relevant to employment needs.
- * Excellent feedback systems.
- * Good progression analysis.
- * Good linkage between academic theory and practice.

STUDENT WELFARE

- * Students are fully involved in VUZF's development.
- * Proactive Student Council.
- * Good out-of-hours systems to deal with emergencies.
- * Close working relationship between students and staff. Problems can easily be identified.
- * Excellent careers support service.
- * Relevant information provided prior to and upon entry to the University.

PREMISES AND FACILITIES

- * Excellent educational environment.
- * Well equipped classrooms.
- * Good IT and audio visual facilities.
- * 24 hour security.

Actions required	Priority H/M/L
None	

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.	YES
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