

BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM INSPECTION (Independent Higher Education)

INSTITUTION: VUZF University

ADDRESS: 1 Gusla Street
Ovcha Kupel District
1618 Sofia
Bulgaria

HEAD OF INSTITUTION: Professor Grigorii Vazov

ACCREDITATION STATUS: Accredited

DATE OF INSPECTION: 5 December 2019

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION AND DATE: Continued accreditation 20 February 2020

PART A – INTRODUCTION

1. Background to the institution

VUZF University (the Institution) is a private higher education institution offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes. It is situated in a busy commercial and residential district on the outskirts of Sofia, Bulgaria's capital city. It describes itself as a university of finance, business and entrepreneurship. The Institution aims to provide high quality education that reflects contemporary practice in the areas of economics, insurance, information technology and innovation management and to provide a sound basis for graduate employment and career progression.

VUZF University was founded in 2002 by a special resolution of the Bulgarian National Assembly. Approval was granted on the basis that the Institution would offer undergraduate courses in economics. In 2008, the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation granted institutional approval for a period of six years. A year later, all its programmes, including courses at master's level, were approved. Institutional recognition was granted in 2009. In 2010, the Institution began a collaborative degree arrangement to franchise undergraduate degrees with the University of Sheffield managed through the Sheffield International Faculty based at City College, Thessaloniki, Greece. This arrangement is now being phased out as part of the new business strategy for the Institution.

In June 2017, an investment company took a major shareholding with the Institution and appointed a new President who is also Chair of the Board of Trustees. The Rector, who was previously the major shareholder, remained in post, as well as the senior management team. The President and Trustees take responsibility for the overall strategy and financial management of the Institution. The academic council, chaired by the Rector, has responsibility for academic management.

2. Brief description of the current provision

The Institution offers ten bachelor's programmes in finance, financial management and marketing, insurance and social insurance, accounting and finance, business psychology and human resources, online business, marketing and sales, international business and finance, information technology solutions and business strategies, including the joint programme with University of Sheffield in business studies. The Sheffield programme leads to the award of a joint degree from the University of Sheffield and VUZF University.

VUSF University also offers 21 master's programmes in finance, financial management and marketing, business analysis, insurance business risk management, innovation and business processes in insurance, pension and health insurance, accounting, control and corporate analysis, human resources management and leadership behaviour, audit and risk management, innovation, entrepreneurship and finance, journalism, production and finance, and advertising, innovative marketing and brand management. Two doctoral programmes in finance, insurance and social insurance, and accountancy, control and analysis are also offered.

Studies can be undertaken full time, part time, or by distance learning that also includes some attendance requirement. Enrolment is on an annual basis. Entry requirements are as for the United Kingdom and delivery is based over two semesters.

The primary language of study on the VUZF programmes is Bulgarian. The Sheffield programme and one VUZF bachelor's and two master's programmes are taught fully in English.

There are currently 31 permanent teaching staff, many of whom also work in business, 36 part time teaching staff and 28 administrative staff.

At the time of the inspection, approximately 450 students were enrolled on undergraduate programmes and just under 400 were enrolled on master's programmes. There were 50 doctoral students. Around 400 are studying full time, with a majority studying part time.

Of the total enrolments, there are approximately 150 students studying by distance learning, although almost all of these are either based in Bulgaria or are Bulgarian native speakers living overseas. These students must meet the standard entry requirements for higher education in Bulgaria, as the Institution is state approved, and are mainly university age adults in full time employment.

3. Inspection process

The inspection was undertaken by one inspector over one day. During the inspection, meetings were held with senior managers including the President and the Rector, teaching staff, students and the Information Technology (IT) team. A tour of the premises was undertaken. Extensive documentation was examined, in both original Bulgarian and English translation, and a demonstration was seen of the student online learning environment. Staff and students were helpful and cooperative.

4. Inspection History

Inspection Type	Date
Full Accreditation	14-15 March 2013
Interim	31 March 2014
Re-accreditation	27-28 September 2017

PART B – JUDGMENTS AND EVIDENCE

The following judgments and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution.

1. Significant changes since the last inspection

There have been no significant changes to organisation or management since the last inspection. The major change has been the implementation of the new IT system and associated learning technologies, which have provided the opportunity to substantially develop the online resources available to students.

2. Response to actions points in last report

4.8 11.3 Procedures for ensuring the accuracy and currency of publicity materials must be tightened and kept under close review.

The Administrative Director is responsible overall to produce all publicity and website materials. Since the last inspection, the new ownership arrangements have led to the centralisation of preparation of published materials to a standard corporate format, led by a marketing team with input from the departments. All existing out of date materials have been withdrawn. There is now a clear procedure for updating.

5.5 Classroom observations must be undertaken for all staff.

A new protocol for formal observation of all teachers has been put in place. Teaching staff confirmed that they are now observed annually as part of their performance evaluation. The outcomes of observations are recorded and oral feedback to teachers is also provided. The reports identify areas for further development and are seen as useful by staff. All reports are also considered by the senior management committee so that both individual and institutional development needs can be identified.

8.8 The University must introduce sharing of good practice in devising lesson plans to ensure that they are all fit for purpose and easily accessed by administration when required.

A standard format for the preparation of course handbooks is now in place which includes lesson plans. Departments meet at the start of each academic year to discuss their individual plans which are then shared across the Institution through the website. This is good practice and enables potential overlaps to be identified. It also identifies opportunities for reinforcing learning across disciplines. The lesson plans are also being used as the basis for the structured development of new online teaching materials. All documents are available to staff and students through the website.

11.3 There must be regular monitoring of the website for accuracy and functionality.

The Institution is in the process of fully reviewing and renewing its website. There is now only one central web access point through which all materials and information are accessed. This enables content and functionality to be managed and monitored more effectively. The website now acts as a point of information on all aspects of the university, from course content to admissions procedures. It is not yet fully complete, but work is continuing to add materials particularly in English.

12.5 The University must provide recruitment agents with a clear brief and/or training and monitor them closely.

A comprehensive guide, manual and training programme have been developed. The Institution has taken the opportunity to review its use of agents. Many of the previously registered agents have now had their contracts withdrawn. The Institution continues to examine its future relationship with and use of agents. Once this review is complete, the new arrangements will be fully implemented.

13.4 The University must publish a formal anti-discrimination policy and procedures document and bring it to the attention of all students.

The Institution has a clear published statement on discrimination and equality. The Code of Ethics outlines the detailed policy and procedures, which is published on the website. In addition, all students are required to sign a learning contract which refers to discrimination. There is a clear disciplinary system in place for dealing with breaches of the learning contract. Students are clear that they understand their responsibilities and the penalties for noncompliance.

14.3 VUZF must publish a formal students' complaints policy and bring it to the attention of all students.

There is now a complaints policy in place of which students are aware. Examples of the policy were seen in action with regular reporting to the academic council and the following through of a complaint. Students are clear regarding how to complain and to whom they should direct any complaints.

3. Response to recommended areas for improvement in last report

It is recommended that the University ensures that all publicity material displays its publication date.

The Institution has fully revised and rewritten its publicity material to reflect a new corporate style including the date of publication across all subjects.

The university may wish to consider introducing regular staff seminars, with an emphasis on developing staff pedagogical skills.

The introduction of the new classroom observations and the lesson plans has provided the opportunity for a range of training sessions, particularly in the use of the new IT systems. In addition, there are regular staff meetings to discuss curriculum content and delivery. Students remarked on the effective learning taking place in the classroom, with an emphasis on student involvement and interaction and business relevance.

It is recommended that the University collates its existing documentation to produce and publish a formal Equality and Diversity policy.

The Institution has a strong commitment to equality and diversity and has targeted the enrolment of students from minority communities in Bulgaria to seek to address specific local needs. The policy and procedures are outlined in the Code of Ethics which is available on the website.

It is recommended that the University includes on its websites more comprehensive information on fees payable.

The course information on the website now states clearly the fees for each course. The Institution also has in place a system of fee reductions for certain students, for example those who achieve outstanding grades across all subjects. However, the fee reductions could usefully be included in the general enrolment information.

The University is recommended to introduce a more systematic and consistent approach to identifying a wider range of disabilities on student application forms.

The Institution encourages all applications and does not require students to identify disabilities on initial applications. It sees this as demonstrating equality of access. All applicants are also invited for interview where individual needs can be identified and discussed. Nevertheless, it would be helpful if further information were made available on the website in relation to the meeting of specific needs.

The University may wish to consider providing additional student activities of a non-academic nature, such as sports.

The Institution does not have any sports facilities on campus. However, students can sign up for a range of sports activities and these are then made available through hiring external facilities and facilitators. Students referred to hiking and basketball as popular activities. There is also encouragement for students to participate in community volunteering opportunities. Students are content that their needs are addressed.

It is recommended that the University gives greater prominence to English language material on noticeboards.

A graffiti board, used by students to add comments on any topic, included a number of English language contributions, and the English language content of the website is being developed. However, the Institution is encouraged to continue to consider the role of English in the curriculum.

It is recommended that the University reviews the suitability of classroom layouts for more interactive learning activities.

With the exception of the main lecture halls, most classrooms are a mixture of small tables and chairs which can be moved around to suit the needs of the particular class. For first year students, much of the teaching is still primarily input led by the teacher and student-centred content gradually increases as the course progresses. Classrooms are timetabled centrally so that the layout is then determined by the teacher on a class by class basis. Staff and students were content that the current furniture meets their needs.

The University should consider providing students with hard copy guides to the library and IT provision.

A hard copy guide to the library has been printed and distributed to students. All students take part in an induction to the library and IT resources when they enrol. An online guide to the IT and library facilities is available, including through the online learning portal and the Institution's own learning application for mobile telephones. Students were clear that help was also available from staff if they needed advice in finding information or using the IT system.

The University should ensure an early update of the computer operating system.

A new server, operating system and computers have been introduced. These have enabled the Institution to begin full implementation of online learning resources to support distance learning programmes and learning in the classroom. This provides a sound base for the future development of learning modes.

4. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements

4.1 Governance, Strategy and Financial Management (spot check)

The standards are judged to be: Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The Institution has a stable and highly effective senior management team with a clear strategy to ensure that provision is appropriate to the needs of the business. The President, who is also Chairman of the Board of Trustees, is a businessman who also teaches at the Institution.

There is a clear division of accountability between the Trustees, who are responsible for the financial management of the university and the academic council, which is chaired by the Rector and takes full responsibility for the academic management as well as the development of VUZF.

4.2 General and Academic Management and Administration (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The members of the relatively small management and administration team work together effectively to provide extensive opportunities for personal development and to meet the needs of students.

There is a clear understanding and commitment to the developing strategy of the Institution and the respective roles of administrative and academic staff. For example, the Director of Studies for Distance Learning provides both training opportunities and one-to-one support to colleagues as they move their teaching materials online.

4.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Students are highly appreciative of the business relevance of their teaching and learning.

The Institution's research profile is continuing to develop effectively, supported by the development of the new scientific research laboratory which focusses research around the key academic areas and provides a sound basis for the commercialisation and development of research to support local businesses. The Master's in Business Innovation and Entrepreneurship has already enabled graduates to develop new startup businesses.

4.4 Student Support, Guidance and Progression (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Students feel that they are well informed and supported by the management, teaching and administrative staff.

The website is now comprehensive in its information and all students were clear about who to speak to about any problems.

There is a strong relationship with many local businesses which assists students in gaining employment on graduation and provides opportunities for internships. The Institution might consider the opportunities provided by the Master's in Business Innovation and Entrepreneurship to offer similar support and guidance to potential undergraduate entrepreneurs.

12.5 The use of agents is under review, but the process has not yet been completed and agents are continuing to operate without the necessary checks and training.

4.5 Premises, Facilities and Learning Resources (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The premises are maintained to a high standard with a particular emphasis on supporting local young artists through exhibitions and the display of work around the Institution.

The chapel is a good example of supporting local craftsmen and artisans in the decoration of the small building in the university grounds, which is regularly used for weddings and baptisms.

4.6 Quality Management, Assurance and Enhancement (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

There is a strong commitment to quality assurance, enhancement and improvement. This is evidenced in the announcement during the inspection of the Institution's ranking as the number one private business school in Bulgaria. In addition, the Institution has a top five place in the Bulgarian University Ranking System for 2019, in the area of economics, out of 51 institutions.

There are clear regulations in place in respect of quality monitoring and reporting. Both staff and students are aware of the arrangements.

4.7 Online, Distance and Blended Learning (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met NA

Comments

4.8 Compliance Declaration

Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.

Yes No

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

STRENGTHS

A cohesive and effective senior management team.

Committed and well qualified teaching staff with a strong team ethos.

ACTIONS REQUIRED

12.5 A review of the recruitment agents that are used and the implementation of new protocols must be completed.

High Medium Low

RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT *(to be reviewed at the next inspection)*

The Institution should consider including information on fee rebates on the application website.

The Institution should review the information it provides for students with disabilities and the policy for supporting these students.

The Institution should consider the role of English language in the curriculum.

The Institution should consider how it might make provision to support startup businesses on campus and encourage undergraduates to develop business ideas.

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS - FURTHER COMMENTS, IF APPLICABLE