



A R A C I S
Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

E x t e r n a l I n s t i t u t i o n a l E v a l u a t i o n
Universitatea Bioterra București, România

F o r e i g n E x p e r t R e p o r t

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the Bioterra University in Bucharest (BUB) for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from May 22 to 24, 2013. This was the third evaluation of the University after ARACIS-visits in 2009 and 2011. BUB has asked for another evaluation because it wants to change the judgement "limited degree of confidence" to "confidence". Beside the institutional evaluation the study programmes "Engineering and Management for Food and Agro-tourism", "Law" and "Control and Expertise for Food Products" (in Alexandria) were selected to be evaluated too.

During the last four years I have participated in eight ARACIS evaluations. As a member of the pool of experts of the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) I have participated already in more than 20 evaluations in 7 European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Furthermore, I have also worked as a peer for the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE). Hence the following observations and comments will not reflect only my experiences with the ARACIS-evaluations in Romania but also my IEP-background and European perspectives. My focus is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes. The self-evaluation process, international perspectives as well as governance and quality assurance are important core elements of my considerations.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof. univ. Dr. Radu Oprean and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. Dr. Nicolae Todea for conducting the evaluation process in a very efficient way and to the members of the ARACIS team for their constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit. I want to thank especially the student member Mrs. Ruxandra Pricope of the team for her permanent assistance during the visit.

My special thank goes to the leadership of Bioterra University, the Founding Rector Prof. univ. Dr. Ion Nicolae and the Rector Prof. univ. Dr. Cornel Trandafir for their hospitality and organization of my visit. Furthermore, I also want to express my appreciation to the President of the Senate, to the Vice-Rector for International Relations and to the Director of Administration as well as to the various representatives including students of Bioterra University, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their open discussions to a good view of the institution. Last but not least I want to thank the Technical Secretary Mrs. Oana Sârbu from ARACIS for her friendly way of holding contact with me and providing all necessary information for the visit and Mr. Mihai Marcu from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation.

2. Organizational Details of Bioterra University

The Bioterra University was founded in 1994 and accredited by law in 2002. As an higher education institution it is part of the national Romanian education system, a legal person

of private law and public utility. The University's headquarter is situated in Bucharest but some study programmes are also offered outside Bucharest in Focsani, Alexandria, Slobozia and Buzau. When BUB was founded it was the first and only university offering specializations in the field of agro-tourism management, phyto-sanitary and zoo-veterinary food control. In the course of years, reacting on new challenges BUB diversified its curricula and established new specializations such as "Control and Expertise of Alimentary Products", "Engineering of Alimentary Products" and "Law", with applicability in the competence fields of the other disciplines. Actually BUB has 5.325 undergraduate students (2.233 traditional full-time students and 3.092 low attendance students) in twelve (but only six different) undergraduate study programmes and 142 students in three Master programmes.

The main financial resources of the University come from school fees, admission and degrees. The total income of BUB in 2011 was estimated with 23.897.841 Lei but finally reached only 14.376.874 Lei accompanied by total expenses of 13.429.948 Lei. Nevertheless, BUB expects revenues of about 24.000.000 Lei for the years 2013, 2014 and 2015.

The University is led by the President of the Foundation, the Founding Rector Prof. univ. Dr. Ion Nicolae. The President of the Senate and the Rector are subordinated to the President of the Foundation. The Rector together with three Vice-Rectors (teaching, international relations, research), the Scientific Secretary and the Administrative Director are responsible for the daily management of the University. The Senate is composed of 25 teachers and 8 students and has according to the Law of National Education 2011 the duty to monitor and control the activity of the executive management and to approve proposals by the management.

The University owns land and buildings for teaching and learning, sports, student hostels and canteens in Bucharest, in its four locations outside Bucharest and in Germany. At least the buildings in Bucharest are in good or even excellent state, but there seems to exist a need for improving the technical standard of some lecture rooms (internet connection and the use of beamers, adequate blackboards). BUB is structured in 4 Faculties and 6 Departments.

The University offers Bachelor degree and Master degree programmes in the fields of Agro-tourism Management, Food Engineering, Control and Expertise of Food Products and Law. There are strong competitors in higher education especially in the Bucharest area offering similar or related study programmes. The main advantage of Bioterra University against its competitors is that it is small and enables good personal contacts between teachers and students. Another advantage is that many programmes are also offered for students with low attendance such that working students can follow an academic education. Moreover, the education at BUB is very practical oriented and students are trained in well equipped laboratories.

BUB faces several challenges:

- BUB has a very small number of students. This is aggravated by the decreasing number of high school graduates in Romania in general and the growing competition

by other universities offering similar or related study programmes. In Romania there are four universities offering agro-food programmes, 14 research institutes, four research centres belonging to the Academy of Agricultural Science and Forestry, three belonging to the Romanian Academy, one to the Ministry of Agriculture and some to private institutions.

- The actual budget of BUB depends almost exclusively on student fees.
- Challenges of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna idea, internationalisation, quality assurance, employability, etc.) require universities to react.
- BUB is in a state of transition. The actual management (Founding Rector and President of the Foundation) of BUB is already for 19 years on duty. According to new regulations, a part of the original (founding) staff had to retire recently or will retire soon.

3. Outline of the Visit

The Institutional Self Report (ISR) provided by Bioterra University consists of 47 pages with references to 116 Annexes. It describes the development of the institution since its foundation in 1994 and its actual situation. Some informative data on the management, teaching and research is provided, but concrete numbers and details such as the number of students at the University, the number of students in the different locations outside Bucharest, a list of existing Master programmes or data on the number of graduates are not provided in the ISR nor in the Annexes. Internationalisation is not touched at all. There is no description of the relations of the University with the outside world (enterprises, society). Important information like the annual budget can be found only in the Annexes. The ISR is redundant with respect to many points (e.g. election of the Rector, composition of the Senate). The ISR does not mention any problems and not contain any self-critical parts like a swot-analysis. The document is signed by the Rector but the members of the self-evaluation group are not named. The ISR leaves the impression of a duty which has been solved by adding separate, already existing documents to one not consistent report without any coordination. The biggest disadvantage is that the ISR is not self-contained and therefore not readable without having the huge number of Annexes available. As I consider the self evaluation process as a very important step of any evaluation procedure I think BUB has missed the chance to use this evaluation for an institutional-wide discussion on the present situation of BUB, its problems and possibilities for the future.

The institutional evaluation visit to Bioterra University began in the evening of 21st May of 2013 with the arrival of the ARACIS team from outside Bucharest at the local Hotel Erbas. During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Wednesday, May 22, 2013

The evaluation procedure started punctually at 9:00 a.m. in the Rector's office of BUB. The Founding Rector welcomed the ARACIS delegation, gave a short introduction into the University and presented the Rector, the Vice-Rectors and the Administrative Director. The Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. Dr. Nicolae Todea presented the ARACIS team and gave a short overview on the evaluation procedure. For the limited time of the visit, he asked the university representatives to be very short and precise in answering questions. The Mission Director started the discussion asking the university leaders on their view about a merger of BUB with another institution. In the answer it was stated that the University had no plans for a merger. I asked the Founding Rector to comment on the published irregularities with exams in September 2012 and which consequences had been set by the institution in order to avoid similar incidents for the future. It was explained to the ARACIS team that the case last autumn was the individual act of one university member only. It was not made clear if the University had taken any consequences in order to prevent things like this.

In the following internal ARACIS team meeting (9:45 to 10:00 a.m.) some ARACIS documents were distributed. Prof. univ. Dr. Nicolae Todea explained to the Team what he wanted to be especially reviewed in course of the evaluation. The problem of the small student numbers and the grading of students were mentioned.

From 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. the evaluation team was guided through the BUB headquarters. Several lecture rooms and amphitheatres were visited. We also met some ongoing classes. A visit to the Central Library and to many laboratories (e.g. National Control Laboratory and Alimentary Products Expertise, Environment Protection Laboratory, Green Energy Laboratory, Oenology Laboratory, Biochemistry Laboratory, Analytical Chemistry Laboratory, Microbiology Laboratory, Zootechnics Laboratory etc.) as well as to two very modern Computer Laboratories concluded the tour.

From 11:30 a.m. to 13:00 p.m. I checked documents concerning the budget and staff of BUB.

After lunch, from 14:30 to 17:00 p.m. I went on checking documents provided by BUB. From 17:00 to 18:00 p.m. there was a meeting with 35 (25 females) students. There were no severe complains or suggestions for alterations with respect to the education at Bioterra University. But there was also no enthusiasm visible studying at BUB. There were no students present with mobility experience. It was stated that there was no support and nearly no information with respect to international mobility programmes. Knowledge of English by students was not evident. The students seemed to be very passive and did not even criticise that student representation in the Senate was not following the Romanian legislation which asks for a minimum of 25% students in this body (8 students out of 33 Senate members are less than 25%). Summarising, students did not mention any special incidents or irregularities. But support for student mobility and student involvement in the different bodies of the University seem to be areas for improvement.

From 18:00 to 19:00 p.m. a meeting with 14 (5 females) graduates was arranged. The ma-

jority of the present persons obtained their title as low attendance students having already a job before completing their academic education at BUB. There were persons from food control, hotel management, agro-tourism, government institutions etc. present. Good connections to the University were reported. Feedback improving study programmes is wanted by BUB. Some graduates asked for more hours dedicated to practical work included into the programmes. Several graduates provide internships for students in their companies.

Thursday, May 23, 2013

From 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. I arranged private meetings with the President of the Senate, with the Vice-Rector for International Relations and with two students, who had experienced an internship in Vienna. Moreover, I discussed with the Administrative Director the annual budget (comparing income and expenses) for the year 2011 and following. From 11:30 a.m. to 13:00 p.m. I checked documents. After lunch I attended meetings of the Mission Director, the Scientific Secretary and the Technical Secretary with members of the Ethic Committee and the Department of Quality Assurance. By my view neither the Ethic Committee nor the Department of Quality Assurance is operating optimally. Both units need evidently some further improvement.

From 17:15 to 17:50 p.m. a part of the ARACIS team met 3 employers (1 female). The two men came from huge government institutions, the lady from a hotel company. After a short presentation the Mission Director asked the employers for their experiences with respect to the competences of the graduates. It was stated that the education of the institution was good and the qualification of BUB's graduates did not differ from graduates of other institutions. All three employers offer regularly internships to students from BUB. It was mentioned that a small institution like BUB could react better to new challenges of the society. The employers think that BUB fulfills perfectly the needs of the market.

Between 18:00 and 19:00 p.m. we had a short debriefing on our impressions and discussed the oral presentation for next day.

Friday, May 24, 2013

At 9:00 a.m. the team members finalized their documents and summarized their impressions. Opinions were interchanged. I checked some missing student numbers assisted by our student member Ruxandra Pricope. From 11:45 to 13:00 a.m. the Mission Director Prof. univ. Dr. Radu Oprean and the other team members gave an oral report on their impressions in front of the President of the Foundation Prof. univ. Dr. Ion Nicolae, Rector Prof. univ. Dr. Cornel Trandafir and the Administrative Director Prof. univ. Dr. Floarea Nicolae. The preliminary results of the evaluation were given. Strengths and weaknesses were mentioned and also some first recommendations given. I mentioned the mayor challenges of BUB and stated my view that it was very difficult to run a university in our days like a family business. The actual challenges of the European Higher Education System can only be solved by a strong university leadership with a very active rector who has

also a certain degree of independence from the Foundation.

The President of the foundation thanked the Team for its professional work and answered also to some critical remarks. He stated that many points mentioned have not been clarified because of the lack of time. Some ARACIS members gave their view that the University should focus on bio-engineering and not on law. Finally also the Rector and the Administrative Director thanked the team for the given recommendations and the time spent for this evaluation.

4. Governance and Institution

As already mentioned, the motivation for this evaluation was the aim of Bioterra University to change the actual judgement "limited degree of confidence" to "confidence". Probably the fact that BUB suffered a terrible damage of its reputation by the publicly reported irregularities with exams was another motive to ask for another ARACIS visit. The leadership of the University showed high identification with the institution. Also all other staff members including the Administrative Director - a former rector and husband of the Founding Rector - are very engaged and highly committed to the institution. Thanks to a good financial management Bioterra University disposes of several buildings in Bucharest, at four outside locations in Romania and one property in Germany. Consequently the organisational structure of BUB is complex. During the last two years the University leadership has tried to react on the evaluation of 2011.

But BUB evidently still has severe problems. I have already commented the ISR. The organigram given in Anexa 3.1 of the ISR subordinates the Rector to the President of the Senate. This does certainly not reflect the intentions of the Law 2011. Rector and President of the Senate should be on the same level under the President of the Foundation. The existing Strategic Plan and Operational Plan do not give any indicators, any time limits and do not define responsibilities. A real operational plan has to contain these important points and to define monitoring procedures in order to check progress. As already mentioned, there exists an Ethic Commission and a Quality Assurance Department at BUB. My problem with an ethic commission in a small private institution is, that the commission depends strongly on the owners and cannot act independently. Hence I suggest to make such a commission more independent and create an inter-university commission together with another institution composed by members of both institutions. The Quality Assurance Department has started work, but by my view the University still has to go a long way to functioning quality assurance system. Quality assurance should cover all aspects of the institution. The engagement of students in quality assurance is completely passive. Students seem not to take any ownership of quality assurance processes.

Recommendations:

- From the European point of view a university leadership nearly 20 years on duty is

a very long period. The owners of private universities must end to consider their university as a family business. The actual challenges of universities can only be mastered with a strong independent rectorate working within the framework given by the foundation / the owners. The lack of changes in the leading positions of a university management hinders innovation and fruitful development. I think Bioterra University has been managed very well during the last 19 years. Nevertheless, an open discussion on the future of the institution and the involvement of staff, students and stakeholders into this discussion would assist the University to step forward. I recommend that the Foundation and the President with his family withdraw from the daily management of the institution and leave the management to a strong rectorate and a responsibly acting senate. The Foundation should limit its function defining the general framework and monitoring the institution.

- It is not published who produced the ISR. By my impression many institutional leaders and interview partners as well as external stakeholders were not included into the discussion. As I have already mentioned I consider the self-assessment process as the most important part of the evaluation procedure which could start a positive and effective development within the university. The ISR should contain all relevant information on the institution (legal framework, structure, governance and management, financial situation and buildings, teaching, students, research, staff, relations with external environment), give a description of the efforts with respect to quality assurance and internationalisation and include an outline of the institution's mission statement and strategic plan. I encourage BUB not to consider evaluations as inspections but rather as a unique chance to receive the advice of experienced peers.
- BUB should elaborate a strategic plan and a corresponding operational plan with clear goals and targets. Monitor progress in form of indicators to be reached regularly and compare with benchmarks from similar institutions.
- The financial resources of Bioterra University should be more diversified. Actually the University depends exclusively on student fees. Try to increase own income (consultancies, applied projects with society, research projects), but also try to cut internal costs.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But in order to be able to discuss and solve also sensitive tasks I strongly recommend to install an inter-university commission with half members coming from Bioterra University and the other half from other universities. Only such a body will be really independent from "not wanted" influences. Furthermore, students have to be included into the Ethic Commission.
- Strengthen relations and information flow with graduates and employers. The University should make better use of these groups and formalize the relations (e.g.

alumni association, friends of Bioterra association).

- Try to sign contracts of cooperation with other research institutions in order to be able to offer better research conditions for staff and students.
- At the moment there is no common logo used on BUB's publications. Even the President of the Foundation uses the logo of the Romanian Academy on his card instead of a University logo. Some cards of University members do not even give an email address, what is a standard today. Hence I recommend to strengthen the corporate identity of Bioterra University by providing a common email address for staff and students. Use the same logo on all your printed and electronic materials.

5. Quality Culture

The Department of Quality Assurance has started collecting and producing data. But by my impression the quality assurance system is still not functioning. The feedback loops are not closed, consequences and supportive instruments are missing. Instruments motivating students and teachers are not realized (e.g. excellent teacher, very good student). Quality assurance should be used for improvement, covering all aspects (teaching, research, administration) of the institution.

Recommendations:

- Define clear procedures how to improve teaching, research and administration by the collected information and the results of evaluations.
- Use the collected data in order to provide advice. Develop mechanisms to support academic staff in their teaching and research missions (e.g. staff training).
- Create incentives for excellent teaching and research (e.g. award excellent teacher, recognized researcher).
- Increase motivation of students for obtaining excellent study results (e.g. grants, bonus on fees).

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality of the formation is recognized by employers and graduates. The possibility for working students to attend a low attendance programme is considered as a big advantage. The visited facilities and premises are excellent. The only thing I missed were appropriate blackboards in the lecture rooms and power point beamers. The strong pressure not to loose students could be a risk for the quality of the education. There are evidently deficiencies in following the Bologna ideas (shift to a student centred education, more

selective subjects, encourage mobility, etc.). BUB does not promote any clear language policy. Engineers without the knowledge of foreign languages have no future in Europe.

Recommendations:

- Increase autonomous student work and self learning parts. Increase the number of selective courses. Enforce contacts between the University and enterprises in order to integrate students into project work.
- Formalise contacts with stakeholders and employers in order to monitor and improve the quality of education.
- Enforce internationalisation by using English text books beside Romanian literature. I could not find any English text book in the library. Encourage your teachers to use English text books parallel with Romanian books.
- Offer students a course "English for Engineers" and sign an agreement with another university which gives your students and staff the possibility to attend classes in foreign languages.
- Establish mobility agreements for students and staff with other universities and research institutions.

7. Research

There is no description of a visible clear research policy of Bioterra University in the ISR. The provided data is more or less an addition of individual research interests. Despite I have received some information on ongoing EU-projects, the ISR does not mention any concrete projects nor institutional research tasks. There are also no applied projects and consultancies listed in the ISR. Actually Bioterra's research is not sufficiently visible.

Recommendations:

- Enforce research activities and try to move from a pure teaching university to a teaching university with research.
- Create critical masses by enforcing co-operations with other institutions. Support publications in English language.
- Recruit future academic staff by defining concrete teaching and research profiles and support young research staff by reduction of their teaching load. Give financial support for teaching staff to participate at national and international research activities.

8. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is an essential element of higher education. BUB should increase its activities and support with respect to mobility programmes, language policy, internationalisation of curricula, joint study and double degree programmes, collaborative research, conference attendance etc.

Recommendations:

- Support mobility of teachers and students (install an office for international relations - maybe in co-operation with other universities) and provide information on international agreements, programmes and grants for students and staff.
- Strengthen the foreign languages policy inside the institution.
- Orientate your curricula according to international standards.

9. Final Remarks

Please consider these remarks and comments as constructive critics. This report should assist Bioterra University to master its actual difficult situation and pursue its further path of improvement. Links to employers should be strengthened, co-operations established and curricula flexibly organised. The University should reflect if the expansion of "law" makes sense. There is definitely no need to offer additional law programmes in Bucharest nor in Romania. On the other hand bio-engineering and related fields are very important and growing disciplines which should be strengthened. Hence I recommend the University should concentrate on its original area. The new Romanian legislation could be taken as a starting point to think in new directions such as mergers with other institutions in order to solve existing problems and to become a recognised university of critical mass in the core fields biology, agriculture and alimentation.



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