



ARTIFEX UNIVERSITY BUCHAREST EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2016

Introduction

I was invited for a second time to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of the ARTIFEX University, Bucharest as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 9 November and Friday 11 November 2016. Before the three day long visit I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During my stay in Bucharest with the help of the colleagues of ARTIFEX I had the possibility to insight all the documentations and annexes of the evaluation process and collect every useful and important information about the university. My report is roughly following the structure of the self evaluation report of the institution. According to my earlier experiences I have the possibility to overview the activities of ARTIFEX University in the last five years and examine the past, present and future quality management development aspects and challenges of the institution as well.

Background

The ARTIFEX University of Bucharest continues the tradition which started in 1919 when the Central School for Co-operative Studies has been established in Bucharest. This institution later became the Academy for High Co-operatives Studies and continued to operate in various forms in the next decades. In 1992 the ARTIFEX University has been set up as a higher education and research institution with a private, non-profit character, and the university started to establish most of the present educational programs and specializations. The ARTIFEX University as an institution of higher education is a part of the Romanian national system of education. It is very important to

draw attention to the fact that the university has traditionally strong connections with the 'co-operative world' and co-operative studies are among the important educational priorities of the institution. The university has the next authorized and accredited faculties and educational programs:

- Faculty of Finance and Accounting, with 2 bachelor degree programs (Finance and Banking; Accounting and Management Information Systems) and 3 master degree programs (Management for Finance, Banking and Insurance; Finance, Banking and Capital Markets; Informational System Management for Finance and Accounting);
- Faculty of Management – Marketing: 3 bachelor degree programs (Management; Marketing; Economy of Commerce, Tourism and Services) and 5 master degree programs (Organizational Management; Management of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises; Marketing and Business Communication; Strategic Marketing; Business Administration in Commerce, Tourism and Services).

According to the self-evaluation report of the institutions, the main aims and priorities of the university from the beginning have been the next:

- *Permanently increasing the quality of activities in order to operate ARTIFEX as a well manageable institution at national and international level with integrating the university to the European Higher Education System;*
- *Permanently increasing the efficiency and competitiveness of the didactic field;*
- *Developing scientific research;*
- *Developing, perfecting and diversifying the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students;*
- *Permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework, and infrastructure.*
- *As a founding member of the European Co-operative University, the Bucharest ARTIFEX University is participating a series of research programs and projects with similar institutions in European and non-European countries.*

Although the above mentioned aims and priorities are basically reflecting correctly to the present challenges of the institution, the university has not really developed new educational programs in the last five years and the earlier stronger connections with the other members of the European Co-operative University do not seem too intensive. Of course, it is not a necessity for a higher education institution to develop new programs but according to the fact that in the last few years there were intensive negative changes in the number of students, it would be possible to attract groups of potential students with new educational programs that meet the needs of the market.

ARTIFEX University as a private institution has to cope with the challenges of a competitive higher education market, national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields and it has to offer attractive study programs which are really based on the demands of the students. We could say that the students are the key elements of these processes: besides the donations, sponsorships, grants and other research resources they are the ones who 'produce' the own resources and make the system financially sustainable with their fees.

It seems that the 'answers' of ARTIFEX for these permanently appearing challenges are basically successful, although it is important to see that the number of students has changed significantly in the last 5 years: in the period of 2011-2016 the institution has lost more than 900 students.

Management, organizational structures, Quality Assurance Management

According to the information and written documents the academic and the administrative leadership of ARTIFEX University have the appropriate competencies to do their work correctly. The managerial structures and other organizational units of the university have a transparent, logical structure and it is suited for the correct management of the organization. The operation of the institution relies on a system of regulations, procedures and tools covering the whole set of university life parallel with the permanent evaluation of the different types of programs, teaching staff and other personnel of the

university. The University has an operative management made up of the President of the Board, President of the Senate, Rector, Pro-Rector, Principal and Chief Secretary, who are coordinating the different activities of the institution.

Quality assurance in education and research is an essential component of the university management activities, as a permanent process and monitoring of all the didactic, education, scientific research and other activities of the university, in accordance with the legal provisions. The university has also adopted the Strategy of Development (2016-2020) – strategic planning is operating since 2008 in the institution.

According to the self evaluation documentation of the institution and personal field experiences the scientific potential and quality of human resources of ARTIFEX University is on a good level. The teaching staff in ARTIFEX University has proper competencies, qualifications, and academic degrees which certainly results a good level of performance in education processes. According to the received data, in the 2015-2016 academic year, the University has a teaching and research staff of 47 people, out of which 42 full time, 3 tenured in part time with fixed duration labor agreements and 2 are associated teachers with temporary employment contract. In the last five years in the number of the teaching staff there was almost a 40% reduction, certainly due to the changes of the relatively great decrease of the number of students. Out of the 42 full time teaching staff, 7 are professors, 19 are associate professors, 8 lecturers, 8 assistant lecturers. In the last years some of the colleagues have stepped forward in the academic hierarchy and it seems that the reduction has mainly affected the assistant lecturers of the institution.

International visibility and collaboration

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields a higher education institution has to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. In case of ARTIFEX these connections have strong traditions according to the special co-operative orientation of the institution. Although the

intensity of these connections and cooperation seems to be less strong in the present, it is important to point out that co-operative studies which appear in many curriculums of educational programs of ARTIFEX are very unique in many aspects. ARTIFEX University should pay more attention for collaboration focusing on countries, universities or any other institutions where these fields also appear in educational programs and research activities and has to (re)develop the earlier connections and cooperation, if this priority remains a priority in the next years.

Material resources

ARTIFEX University is located in its own building in Bucharest and has the material base for education processes: classes and seminars halls, laboratories, sport hall and field, library, offices, storehouses, hostel, canteen, cultural and scientific center, and medical center as well. The student dormitory has an accommodation capacity of 400 students. Students have good conditions in the dormitory. The material base of the institution is in a proper level and meets the needs of the students. Although the buildings, infrastructure and other facilities have not changed significantly in the last few years, the university has spent time, energy and money to keep and maintain these conditions in a good level.

The institution also has a publishing house which is a relevant advantage for ARTIFEX University ensuring good possibilities and provides good conditions for students and for staff members, too. University textbooks and seminary books can be reached in the library of the institution and there are strong efforts to publish the recent publications of the teachers online as well.

Beside the above mentioned material resources there is also a unique curiosity of the university which can be found in the basement of the main building: there is 'mini-museum', an interesting fashion exhibition there. Although this exhibition is not connected to the profile of the university, it is an interesting experience where visitors could see traditional and modern clothes from different ages.

The maintenance of equipment and installations in connection with the educational process seem to be an important priority and meets the demands of students quite well. These investments and developments are financed through the institution's own sources. On the whole the university meets the demands of European standards but it is important to continue the work to invest permanently to maintain and develop its present infrastructure.

Educational programs

There are no un-authorized or non-accredited educational programs at ARTIFEX University. Starting with the university year 2005-2006, ARTIFEX University has implemented the Bologna Process principles, although the third level, PhD studies are 'missing' from the educational programs. The main profile to offer BA and MA programs on the field of economic studies covering wide range of knowledge on this field.

The number of students have changed intensively in the last few years, from 2.467 students (2011/2012) to 1.539 in the 2015/2016 school year. The schooling numbers are changing and fluctuating from year to year, but on the other hand, there are certain processes that could be promising, for example the number of the first year BA students between 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 increased with more than 80 students. Due to the permanently changing higher education environment, needs and expectations of the students, it is very important to maintain the present tools to attract students and develop new methods to reach wider range of the potential students.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that cooperative studies are an important focus of the university from the beginning. This is a very unique focus in the Romanian higher education and thanks to the fact that the present educational programs are not 'extraordinary' as there are many other public and private institutions basically with the same supply, it would be very important to manage this field as a significant priority in the future and organize educational programs and research activities on this field.

The university doesn't offer foreign language educational programs for the students although there are some foreign students who are attending the different Romanian

language educational programs. Although the idea to develop foreign language educational programs could be promising in the future, present human resources are basically not allowing this kind of development path.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, the university is self financing, establishing funds for activity from the annual school tuition taxes, from donations and sponsorships, interests, and from the works of the research contracts, scientific contracts, etc. According to the details and the consultations with the staff of the university the financial activities – incomes and expenses of ARTIFEX are well-balanced. It is important to point out that without state support ARTIFEX has to cover its expenses with its own incomes which means that the most significant part is coming from student fees, and from some other outside resources, extra budget incomes. The present number of the students and the present amount of fees paid by them seems to be enough to sustain the university processes in this level but on the other hand, the relatively radical changes in the total number of students certainly resulted the significant reduction of number of teaching staff in the last years. I think that without jeopardizing the present academic and scientific level in a long run it is not possible to continue to reduce the teaching staff if the decrease of the number of students will not stop in the future.

According to the received information, it is important to maintain and increase the present average number of students in the future to make the system more sustainable. If the schooling trends are not going to change in the near future, the decreasing number of students and decreasing incomes result that ARTIFEX would be forced to find other outside resources, extra budget incomes, or has to find new ways, new education programs or new strategic orientation.

It is important to point out that the university permanently tries to attract potential students. One of the most important part of this 'attraction' are the different policies in connection with tuition fees: educational programs offered by the ARTIFEX, the studies are free of charge for all the students of the first year. There are also other possibilities

for example students from orphanages are free of charge all over the school duration of the BA studies. Additionally, all the students who recorded by the end of each year of studies a mean over 9.50, they take the advantage of free of charge studies during the following year. There is also a financial assistance for students as granting of scholarships and other forms of financial support as well as other social assistance to the students. Additionally, ARTIFEX fees seem to be lower than the average level of fees of the competitors.

Students, public information

It is favorable process that growing number of students participates in master programs of the university. Besides the earlier mentioned 'attractions' ARTIFEX University is offering jobs to a series of its graduates in the frame of the cooperative system in Romania, according to the conventions National Union of the Craft Cooperative, The Territorial Associations of Craft Cooperatives and Societies, in the frame of the private system through employers. According to the data and the meetings with the students as a part of the evaluation process large share of the university graduates manage to find their place in the labor market, although not everyone is working on the fields of studies.

There is a Counselling and Career Development Center at ARTIFEX University. This center is offering to the students, master students, didactic staff and non-didactic personnel a room for formatting, communicating and informing on the new educational technologies, a place for culture, opening, meeting and professional integration.

The University is also offers social, cultural and sport services for students. The university dormitory can accommodate up to 400 students. Accommodation prices are kept at an accessible level for the students. Students are entitled to paid meals at affordable prices, through the protocol concluded between „ARTIFEX” University and Spiru Haret UCECOM College. As a result of re-organization there are four/six students per a room with improving the access to the utilities (bathrooms, joint offices on each floor, access to Internet, multi-media endowments, reading rooms within the dormitory, etc.). The university also rents rooms which are not occupied by the students.

The public information can be found on the ARTIFEX University site, which is one of the most important parts of the communication with the external environment including correct information about the main aspects of the education process in Romanian language. Although an English language part of the university homepage exists, it would be important to widen the reachable quantity of information. The university uses social media very intensively to reach present and potential students as well.

Research activities of ARTIFEX University

The importance of research activities seems to be significant in the university and the results of these activities are apparently integrated to the educational process as well. In ARTIFEX University, just like everywhere in the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources become more and more important in financing the different kinds of research activities. In consideration of the institution prestige, ARTIFEX University should organize conferences more intensively which are very important for the national and international visibility of the institution and beside the 'outsider' lecturers and participants it gives possibility for the students and teachers from ARTIFEX to present the results of their research activities. Starting with the university year 2009-2010, the University is publishing its own review of economic studies and researches in the periodical called ART ECO.

Although there are some international connections of the University (Egypt, Germany, France, Russia, Canada, Sweden, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Turkey, Spain, etc.), most of them are based on the personal connections and personal research activities of the teachers or exist with the members of the earlier mentioned European cooperative umbrella organization where the activities seem to be at a moderate level in the last few years. The university doesn't use the advantages of ERASMUS in this moment and it is strongly recommended to rethink the importance of this exchange program and enter into bilateral contracts with universities and give the possibility to students and staff members taking part in mobility activities funded and supported by the EU.

Conclusion

My report is based on what I have experienced; what I have seen, what I have read and have heard before and during my visit. On the whole ARTIFEX University meets the educational and professional training specific standards of education and scientific research. I recommend the level of confidence rate for the university with strongly emphasizing the following:

- I suggest that in the framework of ERASMUS the university has to develop more international links and collaborations to support international research activities and encourage students and staff members taking part in exchange and mobility programs;
- ARTIFEX University should continue to invest in infrastructure and facilities when own resources, and any other funds allow;
- university has to be proactive and have to pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students, etc.);
- ARTIFEX University permanently has to manage its existing national and international partnerships and should establish new partnerships with institutions, associations, companies;
- Parallel with traditional roles, universities have to adapt to the new needs of the students where permanent improvement of quality have to be in focus; consider that this type of adaptation needs flexibility and investment in human capital;
- The changing number of students should be an important signal that is remarkable enough for the institution to rethink the present model of operation: ARTIFEX has to find its competitive factors with specialization and have define and find the role and the place in local and international market and attract new groups parallel with the traditional markets;
- Present students are belonging to a new generation and new types of students. Beside the special characteristics of this generation that higher education has to reflect somehow, probably this generation is going to face with the global

economic, social and environmental problems and challenges: that is the reason why new knowledge elements are needed. ARTIFEX could be among those higher education institutions on economic field who take seriously the importance of economic, social and environmental challenges and, similar to the cooperative studies, integrate them to the curriculums of the different educational programs.

Finally, I would like to thank to the President of the University, to the Rector of ARTIFEX and all the University staff for the pleasant atmosphere and the support during my stay in Bucharest. At least but not last special thanks to ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation process in Romania.

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