

# DRĂGAN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF LUGOJ EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2017



## Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of Drăgan European University of Lugoj as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 07 June and Friday 09 June 2017. Before the three day long visit I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During my stay in Lugoj with the help of the colleagues of Drăgan European University 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. According to my earlier experiences I have the possibility to overview the activities of Drăgan European University in the last years and examine the past, present and future development aspects and challenges of the institution as well.

## Background

Lugoj is a relatively small town with 40.000 inhabitants in Timiș County, 60 km from one of the largest Romanian cities, the county capital Timișoara. The Drăgan European University was founded here in 1992 by Iosif Constantin Drăgan, a professor who was born in Lugoj, made a significant business and scientific career abroad and later, in the 1990s founded a university in his hometown. Earlier there was no higher education institute in Lugoj so it was a great opportunity and chance for the town, for the inhabitants of the region, for local institutions, organizations, companies and of course for those who would like to continue their studies without leaving the city and the area. Educational programs offered by the new university soon became very attractive as

there was a great demand for the new competences: in these years the university managed to follow up the market needs of transition economies as in the 1990s there was a great demand for graduated laborforce with law and economic diplomas and competences everywhere in Central-Eastern Europe. This favorable situation started to change later as the market needs have changed although the institution still plays an important educational, scientific and cultural role in Lugoj and in the region.

### **Juridical framework, mission and objectives**

In 1992 the Drăgan European University of Lugoj has been set up as a higher education institution with a private, non-profit character, and the university started educational programs on the field of law and economic studies. Drăgan European University of Lugoj – as an institution of high education, legal person of private law and public utility, integrant part of the Romanian national system of higher education, having the purpose of training highly-skilled specialists in the above mentioned fields, preparing active citizens for living in a democratic society, preserving and developing, through teaching, learning and researching a strong foundation of complex and advanced knowledge.

The main aims and priorities of the university can be found among the missions and objectives of the institution. Although these general targets are very important and essential in order to operate a university at high standards, the present, new management of the university has a great challenge to implement these goals in the next years as the earlier, more intensive demand for the offered educational programs has lowered in the last years: the number of students is decreasing relatively permanently, and right now the total number of students, according to the self evaluation report of the institution is just over 600 in two faculties and two BA and two MA programs of the university. If we compare the present number of students (2016/2017 school year) with the 2012/2013 school year numbers, there is almost a 50% reduction. The most intensive changes can be seen at the Law BA program where only 36% of the earlier number of students are attending the program in this moment. In case of the other programs of the university the decrease is lower although it is also remarkable: more than 40% at Finances and Banks BA program, 30% at Criminal Investigation

Management MA program and 28% is in the case of Financial Management MA program. This situation is really a great challenge for the institution because these changes seriously effect all the fields of university operation and as well as the possible and potential future development directions of the institution. These changes could have several reasons like certain effects of demographic changes, decreasing interest, worsening financial background of potential students, changing preferences of students, changing role of higher education, market competitors, educational programs of other higher education institutions and so on. On one hand, lower number of students certainly could result better level of teaching with improving the quality of the educational processes and scientific research as long as the financial background is stable and the longer term financial sustainability of the institution is not in danger. It is important to point out that these changes also could affect wide range of management activities of the university from human resources management to reengineering of the services related to the educational processes. It is important to emphasize that the management of the university is aware of these challenges and have started to make steps for consolidating the operation of the institution.

It is also important to point out that Drăgan European University of Lugoj as a private institution has to cope with the changes of the last years without any help of the state. On the other hand, it is clear that the university management has made certain efforts to cope with these problems (cutback of the number of the titular staff, rent of spaces of the institution, financial support from the Drăgan Foundation, etc.), but that is also clear that there is no further possibility to reduce the number of teachers, and without financial and resources and strong human resource background it is not easy to develop new educational programs beside the existing but permanently declining BA and MA study programs, or produce intensive national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields and expanding international cooperation and connections. The present situation shows how the institution is reflecting for the changes of the number of students, the university has slowly narrowed its activities which is certainly not a good base for future development.

It is also important to point out that Drăgan European University of Lugoj is permanently looking for the potential answers in a relatively successful economic situation where there are great numbers of market actors in Lugoj and the surrounding area who – in an optimal situation - could produce demand for the offered educational programs. The past and present experiences, prestige and competences of Drăgan European University of Lugoj despite of the negative tendencies and challenges still show the importance of the institution in the local and regional environment.

To reach the growth and construction again, the university has to know exactly the needs of the potential students, local communities and market actors to develop educational programs to satisfy these demand. It takes time, energy and money as well, so that is one of the main reasons why the university needs the city very much to make steps again to reach a better and more stable situation. The university is also important for the city of Lugoj, so this common interest and a certain, indirect financial support and the help of the Dragan Foundation could lead to rethink and help to reorganize the activities of the institution to get a better performance in the future.

### **Management, organizational structures, human resources**

According to the information and written documents the academic and the administrative leadership of Drăgan European University of Lugoj have the proper competencies to do their work correctly. The managerial structures and other organizational units of the university have structured and it is suited for the management of the organization, although the small number of teachers results that almost everyone holds positions (member of the Senate, deans, etc.) Faculties (2) and departments (2) exist but according to the relatively small numbers, their role is more formal than real significance.

The tenured teaching staff in Drăgan European University of Lugoj counting 16 teachers: 1 professors, 7 associate professors, and 8 lecturers (all of them hold the scientific title of PhD). Comparing the present situation with the earlier state of the human resources, there is a 40% change, which is a kind of reflexion for the negative challenges of the university. On the other hand, some teaching activities are developed by recognized

specialists, from the outside of the university, which bring their important contribution to the teaching programs with their specific knowledge, field expertise and competencies. It is important to point out again that despite of the fact that the present teaching staff has proper competences without human resource development and new colleagues it is not easy to develop and realize new educational programs.

The university has a strategic plan for the period 2016-2020, basically with general objectives – more students, more intensive scientific activities, intensify cooperation and collaboration, etc. – but the big question is that how, and with what kind of tools and operative activities could be possible to implement the aims? Due to the present challenges, real strategic planning is needed and it is also suggested to revise the existing plan.

### **Educational programs**

The evolution of educational programs from 1992 show that the main focus of the university has remained law and economic studies although certain changes have occurred. As a result, some of the earlier offered education programs had been terminated and new education programs developed. All the present BA and MA education programs seem to be still marketable although the number of students is declining in all the 4 educational programs and most of these fields are not very 'special' (except Criminal Investigation Management MA) as these programs can be found in many private higher education institutions and state universities in Romania.

The university is reflecting to the market needs also organizes postgraduate programs (6) for professional training and development. The present number of students attending these programs is not very high so it is recommended to increase the number of participants with intensive promotion and marketing activities where mostly the graduated students could be a market. It is also suggested to organize part attendance, distance learning or e-learning programs that meet the special needs of the potential students.

## **Financial activity**

As a nonprofit institution, the university is self financing, establishing funds for activities from the annual school tuition taxes, from donations and sponsorships and other incomes. According to the details and the consultations with the staff of the university the financial activities – incomes and expenses of Drăgan European University of Lugoj are relatively well-balanced which certainly shows the steps have made to reflect the lower number of students. It is important to point out that without state support Drăgan European University of Lugoj has to cover its expenses with its own incomes. The most significant part is coming from student fees, and from some other outside resources, extra budget incomes. The present average number of students in the future is certainly not enough to make the system sustainable in a long term if the university permanently wants to invest to infrastructure, maintain facilities on an appropriate level and invest to the development of human resources. 70% of the expenses are for the wages, 30% itself is certainly not enough for future development.

To maintain this situation is an important challenge, as the number of students becomes lower and lower and potential competitors, universities in the neighbouring cities and regions could attract students with similar education programs. If this scenario is going to happen in the near future, the decreasing number of students and decreasing incomes result that Drăgan European University of Lugoj would be forced to find other outside resources, extra budget incomes, or has to find new ways, education programs, which could maintain 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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj some connections already exist but the institution has to expand and intensify these activities in the future.

The research activity can be seen at institutional, individual as well as student level. The university should promote and support teaching staff participation in research programs, strengthen the existing collaboration with industrial and services companies, universities and state institutions. These connections show that the university has a very important role in Lugoj in economical, cultural and social aspects as well.

The university also has 3 evaluated and recognized reviews with scientific character: Drăgan European University of Lugoj Annals. Economic Series, Modern Didactics and Studium Legis, where staff members could publish their new results and of course these reviews are open for other scholars at the related fields.

It is important to point out that students take part in scientific sessions organized by other university centers are very successful and have permanently good results. In consideration of the institution prestige, it would be important in the future to organize conferences and workshops which could be 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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj to present the results of their research activities.

The importance of research activities seems to be not very significant at the university in this moment. European projects should be more and more important in financing the different kinds of research activities and could help the financial activities of the university as well.

In the future the university also has to steps to sign Erasmus contracts with other universities to allow students and staff members taking part in mobility activities.

### **Material resources**

Drăgan European University of Lugoj has the material base for education. The castle-shaped building of the university was built between 1992 and 1995 and designed especially for education purposes (personally, I found this initiative very interesting how Professor Dragan commemorated for the demolished and disappeared Lugoj

fortification). Within its 2.292 square meters the university has a lecture hall with 434 places, 4 lecture rooms with 192 places each, 2 lecture rooms with 57 places each; 6 seminar rooms with 30 places each, 2 equipped IT laboratories, a criminology laboratory, and a reading room with 80 places. This material basis meets the needs of education. It is also important to note that some of the educational spaces have been rented two years ago by the Victor Babes University of Medicine and Pharmacy Timișoara for educational purposes. This rent could produce extra-budget incomes for the university in a long run and certainly shows that other educational programs, beside the law and economic programs could be also attractive in Lugoj.

The university's library has more than 27 000 books in law and economic field, as well as in other specialities related to different education programs.

The equipments and installations in connection with the educational process supply the demands of students well, although the investment and development should be permanent in the future.

### **Students, public information**

The public information can be found on the Drăgan European 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 there are certain informations in English, it would be important to develop an English language homepage to widening the reachable quantity and quality of information.

The promotion of the image of Drăgan European University of Lugoj is communicated with the help of publications in the written, audio and video mass-media, Drăgan European University website. The communication with the public, potential social partners, institutions, are a priority to the university management from the start, as well as the Open Doors Month (every year in May). The University is also offers a range of social and cultural services for students. It is important to point out that the university



uses social media as well. It seems that students use very intensively the facebook interface of the institution with permanently posting messages, photos and contents.

I have also the possibility to participate on the meetings with students, graduates and employers. My remarks are the next:

- Most of the students work in their field after graduation;
- Students, graduates and employers are satisfied with the university, educational programs and recommend it to other potential students;
- University has students from the Republic of Moldova – city of Lugoj helps to accomodate them, although the number of students is not very high in this moment;
- There are internship agreements between local business actors and the university;
- So called 'third mission' of an university – the cultural and social role – operates very well;
- Most of the students are from Lugoj and the surroundings, especially those who want to attend higher education programs in Lugoj without moving to an another city like Cluj or Timișoara – some of them have less stable financial background and they can not afford the higher costs of education in a bigger university center;
- Student participation in Senate is ensured;
- University doesn't have a formalized student organization and the university is not organizing alumni activities although it would be useful in the future, the institution could use the graduated students in the communication and PR activites of the university as well.

It is important to point out that the university permanently tries to attract potential students. It has good connections with the secondary education institutions and other private and state organizations and companies. There is also a financial assistance for students as granting of scholarships and other forms of financial support. BA graduates could also continue their studies in in master programs.

During my visit I had the possibility to meet with some students of the university and I found them very open minded, energetic and intelligent. They seem to be very loyal to their university and pay a lot of attention to their studies. I have also experienced that students I met speak very good English.

### **Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance becomes more and more important in higher education. Although this focus exists in this university as well, the main principle and an objective have to be that quality assurance should become an integral part of the organizational culture of the institution. The evolution and development of a real organizational culture of quality assurance at every stage of university operation should be in focus in the future. The present challenges certainly justify the need to implement a real quality assurance while the institution permanently has to face with economic, social and environmental challenges, so there is a continuous adaptation pressure for quality assurance processes to adjust to the changes.

### **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. I hope that some of my comments will help the university management in the process of permanent improvement of future development. I recommend the level of limited confidence rate for the university with emphasizing the following:

- I suggest to develop international links and collaborations to offer students and staff members the possibility to take part in exchange and mobility programs;
- Because of the intensive social embeddedness of the institution and parallel with the common interest it would be also useful to establish an advisory body with the participation of local educational institutions, city of Lugoj, employers operating in this area to help to find the new and promising future directions of the university;

- Drăgan European University of Lugoj should maintain and continue to invest in the infrastructure and facilities when own resources, and any other funds allow;
- The university has to concentrate on diversification and further development (developing new education programs, distance learning, focusing on other potential target groups, etc.), parallel with managing its resources to keep the present system work;
- Permanently increasing the quality of activities in order to operate Drăgan European University of Lugoj as a well operating institution at national and international level and increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the didactic field;
- Developing scientific research and participate in national and international projects;
- To maintain the present level of intensive involvement of Drăgan European University of Lugoj in the initiatives of social, economic, cultural, regional development;
- The university should pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students, etc.) and has to make a real strategic plan that reflects the present challenges and draw up the main tasks for the next years;
- The university has to rethink the present educational supply and develop/reposition its educational offering;
- Parallel with traditional roles, the university has to adapt to the new needs of the students where permanent improvement of quality has to be in focus; keep in mind that adaptation needs flexibility and investment in human capital;
- University has to find its competitive factors with specialization and have define and find the role and the place in local and national market.

The new management of the university has a great chance and also a great responsibility in this moment: the present, permanent decline of the total number of students is a decision making situation when the management of the university has to think about the future, even if there is a relatively strong foundational background behind

the institution. Of course, basically no guarantee that the university would make good decisions or manage to choose correct diversification paths, but I think that in a situation where certain signals show that the future sustainability of this private institution is not that stable as it was few years ago, the management of the university is going to make the important steps to cope with these challenges. I wish that Drăgan European University of Lugoj would find the right way for success and the right position in the Romanian Higher Education.

Finally I would like to thank to the Rector of Drăgan European University and all the University staff for the pleasant atmosphere and support during my stay in Lugoj. 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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