



A R A C I S

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in 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 Apollonia din Iași, România

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

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European National Quality Assurance Agencies

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the “Apollonia” University in Iași (AUI) for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from November 26 to 28, 2014. This was the third evaluation of AUI by ARACIS after the ARACIS-visits in 2011 and 2012. Beside the institutional evaluation, the study programme "Dental Medicine" was selected to be evaluated too. The main reason for this further ARACIS-evaluation was the fact that some study programmes of AUI were only temporarily authorised.

During the last five years I have participated already in thirteen 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 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 Center for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE). Hence the following observations and comments will not only reflect my Romanian experiences but also 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. Nicoleta Corbu and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Radu Oprean for conducting the evaluation process in a very efficient way and to all members of the ARACIS team for their constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mrs. Mihaela Băjenaru from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for her friendly way of holding contact with me, providing all necessary information and support for the visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the President Prof.univ.dr. Vasile Burlui and to the Rector Prof.univ.dr. Carmen Stădoleanu from the “Apollonia” University in Iași for the friendly welcome and perfect organization of my visit. I also want to express my appreciation to the various representatives of AUI including students, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their discussions to a good understanding of the institution.

2. Organisational Details of “Apollonia” University in Iași

“Apollonia” University (AUI) in Iași was founded by the “Saint Apollonia Foundation” in 1990. It was officially recognized by Law 481/11 July 2002 as “legal entity of private law and public utility, part of the national higher education system”.

The mission of AUI is educational, scientific and cultural research carried out with the participation of all members of the academic community. The version of the Mission Statement stated in the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) is very general and long and could be transferred without any changes also to other HE institutions.

AUI is currently organised with two faculties and six study programmes. The Faculty of Dental Medicine offers the study programmes Dental Medicine (6 years), Dental Technique (3 years), General Nursing (4 years) and Balneo-physio-kinetotherapy and Recovery (3 years). The Faculty of Communication Sciences offers the programmes Communication and Public Relations (3 years) and Journalism (3 years).

According to the SER the University has currently 776 students compared with 862 in the academic year 2013/14. After increasing student numbers till 2012/13, student numbers dropped considerably in the last two academic years because of a reduction of the designated numbers for beginners in the Dental Faculty by the Ministry.

In the current year there are 83 academic staff members assisted by 15 part time teachers and doctoral students.

As the financial resources of the University do mainly come from school-, admission- and degree-fees, the charges for students were raised by 10% in order to cover the operating expenses. As a consequence, despite of the decreasing student numbers the total income of AUI in 2013/14 even increased to 8.81 mio LEI after 6.99 mio LEI in 2012/13. But such an increase of fees cannot be repeated every year.

The University is led by a Board of Trustees chaired by the President of the University and Founder Prof.univ.dr. Vasile Burlui. The President is advised in his activities by the Academic Council, a body bringing together the Senate members with the members of the Administrative Council.

The Senate, the Rector and the Administrative Council are subordinated to the President of the University. According to the Statutes of AUI the President, the Rector together with the Vice-Rector and the Administrative Council are responsible for the executive management of the University. The Senate is composed of 29 teachers including 8 students and has according to the Law of National Education 2011 the task to monitor and control the activity of the executive management. The members of the Administrative Council are nominated by the President.

The University owns or has rented buildings for teaching and learning as well as administration at several different locations in Iași. The visited five buildings are of different material standard. Several facilities have been improved recently and progress improving the equipment is visible. There exists high-tech medical equipment even unique in Romania, but also other equipment such as the furniture for students totally out of date. The form of the lecture rooms is not optimal for teaching and learning activities being too long and quite small. The shortage of space in several visited labs and the restricted working place situation for staff during the visit were obvious.

There are strong competitors in higher education especially in the Iași area offering similar or related study programmes. The main advantage of AUI against its competitors is that it enables good personal contacts between teachers and students. Another advantage is that the education at AUI is very practical oriented and students can learn with modern equipment in small groups.

According to my observations AUI faces the following main challenges which require reaction in order to guarantee the sustainability of the institution:

- The decreasing number of students endangers the financial basis of the institution. Principally, the institution is very small for a university.
- Despite that AUI is a small university it has a huge and complex governing structure. There exist too many decision layers and duties and rights of decision bodies are overlapping and not clearly defined. (This is also caused by Law 2011.)
- Facilities need improvement. Despite of recently provided excellent medical equipment the infrastructure of several university buildings need urgent renovation and there are no adequate working places for teaching and administrative staff. Students are missing a university campus, have to move between different locations

and do not have any space for autonomous group work. AUI is not accessible for students with disabilities.

- As a young university AUI suffers from a bad reputation caused by suspicion from authority and criticism by other institutions of higher education.
- Some offered programmes in the Faculty of Communication Sciences are endangered by small student numbers.
- New challenges of the society and the European Higher Education Area (Bologna idea, internationalisation, quality assurance, research, employability, etc.) require AUI as well as all European universities to react and to give extra attention to these topics.

3. Outline of the Visit

Even as this was the fourth evaluation of AUI within the last three years, the institution took the whole evaluation process and the visit very seriously and did everything in order to support the evaluation team. Evidently, the visit was a great challenge for the small number of administrative staff and the leaders of AUI.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

AUI having the experience of several evaluations, I expected a compact Self-Evaluation Report concentrating on the improvements and changes since the ARACIS evaluation in 2012. A compact SER of 25 to 30 pages describing the actual governing structure, students, staff, budget and facilities as well as recent changes and improvements would have been more useful and adequate than the delivered voluminous materials.

Recommendation:

- As AUI does probably not have the human resources and experience to elaborate a compact and informative self-evaluation report – the discussion of the present situation and the future of a HE institution and the constraint to a short but complete report is a very difficult but fruitful task – I recommend that the institution should seek the advice of an evaluation expert facing another evaluation. Guided through the self-evaluation process by an experienced person could bring big benefits to the institution and save internal resources.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the “Apollonia” University in Iași began in the evening of November 25, 2014, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Majestic Hotel in Iași and an informal working session during dinner.

During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on November 26 at 9:00 in one of the library rooms in the main building of AUI, Pacurari Street no. 11.

The Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Radu Oprean and the Mission Director Prof.univ.dr. Nicoleta Corbu presented the evaluation team and explained the evaluation procedure. Rector Prof.univ.dr. Carmen Stădoleanu welcomed the ARACIS delegation and introduced the University President Prof.univ.dr. Vasile Burlui and the other attending representatives of the AUI.

In the internal ARACIS meeting following the opening session the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Radu Oprean pointed out the main topics of the evaluation (finances, patrimony, human resources).

In the course of the first day the ARACIS team conducted the usual activities. We visited for more than three hours buildings at five different locations of AUI. Our tour started in the main building in Pacurari Street. We saw different laboratories (e.g. phonetic/informatics lab with up-to-date computer equipment, histology lab, biochemistry lab) and the library and also met several on-going classes. The next stop was the building of the Faculty of Communication Sciences housing TV- and radio studios as well as the Apollonia printing and publishing unit and the office of the Ioan Haulica Research Institute. The next visited building was the Faculty of Dental Medicine with labs for experimental medicine, radiology with very modern equipment, digital dentistry, microbiology, embryology, electrical mechanic, nursing, etc., rooms with on-going classes, simulation units and rooms for the dental treatment of patients and the department of implantology. The fourth stop was again a building of the Dental Faculty with several treatment rooms with modern dental chairs. At the end of the tour we visited again a building of the Faculty of Communication Sciences with equipment for continuous learning and class rooms.

In the afternoon I attended the meeting of the ARACIS team with the Quality Commission, the meeting with about 100 students, the meeting with 13 graduates and the meeting with 7 employers and stakeholders. I also had a private meeting with the head of the accounting department.

On the following day (November 27) I had a private meeting with the Rector, with a group of five students, with the President of the Senate and also with the University President and Founder of AUI.

On November 28 from 8:30 am onwards the ARACIS team clarified open questions with representatives of AUI. Everybody worked intensively till about 1 pm, when a part of the team had to leave for the airport. For the lack of time there was no possibility for a short final meeting with the university representatives informing the institution on preliminary impressions. Nevertheless, the representatives of AUI thanked the ARACIS team for their intensive and constructive work.

I want to state at this point that the whole ARACIS team did work very hard for this evaluation, checking data even during late night and early morning hours in order to elaborate a fair, correct and complete report.

4. Governance and Institution

The leadership of the University shows very high identification with the institution and is highly committed. But the whole institution depends too much on only one very active and respected personality, the Founder. In order to guarantee sustainability the University should be based on a broader governing group.

Although the provided Organisational Chart is complex and not fully clear with respect to the distribution of power, the governing bodies of AUI have developed a fruitful and effective way to lead the institution. There exists a culture of consensus and compromise which makes it possible to take also difficult and complex decisions within appropriate time. The separation of tasks of the legislative bodies from the tasks of the executive organs is not realised and there are several overlaps causing multiple discussions of a topic by different bodies. This is probably also caused by the Law 2011, which allows different interpretation of the duties and rights of the Rector, the Administrative Council and the Senate. By my opinion the provided

Organisational Chart does not reflect the actual situation at AUI. The Chart shows several (probably too many) decision layers. De facto, the University seems to be governed by the Founder advised by the Academic Council.

Similar to many other Romanian universities also AUI has a favor for collective decisions. The size of the Senate with 29 members is too big for a small institution like AUI. The Senate should be a fast and efficient decision body concentrating on rules and the legal framework for the institution and its administrative managers. As many staff members as possible should be exempt from administrative and bureaucratic work and use their working power only for teaching and research.

The main problem frequently mentioned were financial problems. The hope that the Ministry will again increase the number of first year students should not be the only strategy. The financial basis should be broadened by additional income from projects and services. Full costs of all activities are not known, but would be essential for strategic decisions.

One possibility to strengthen the reputation of the institution and to convince other HE institutions of the quality of teaching and research at AUI is to invite every academic year some recognized teachers from other universities to give a lecture at AUI or to join a research group. These persons will be ambassadors for AUI at their home institutions.

Recommendations:

- Ensure continuity and sustainability of the University's governance bodies by reducing dependence from only one strong leadership personality.
- Simplify the organisational structure of the University. Reconsider the number of decision layers and the size of the Senate.
- Ensure a clear boundary between Founders as the keeper of the University vision and values, the Rector and the Senate.
- Separate legislation from executive activities.
- Give Rector the power to act within the given rules by the Founders and the Senate.
- Limit Senate to academic issues deciding on rules and the framework for the University's management and on strategic planning.
- Make more use of integrated information systems as basis for planning and decisions.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as AUI is a small institution where everybody knows everybody I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from AUI and the other half from other universities. Only such a body will be able to discuss sensitive cases.
- Invite guest-teachers and guest-researchers from other Romanian universities to AUI in order to strengthen reputation.
- Further proceed the way of improvement and renovation of the facilities for teaching, learning, research and administration.

5. Quality Culture

AUI has started important activities and procedures for quality assurance. There exist a Quality Commission chaired by the Rector and a Quality Manual. But in order to establish a real quality culture at AUI the quality assurance actions should shift from inspection and control to an improve-oriented approach providing support to staff and students.

Recommendations:

- The collected data and the results of evaluations should be used more explicitly for further improvement of teaching, research and administration.
- Promote more clearly to staff and students the benefits and improvements deriving from quality assurance procedures.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality of the formation at AUI was recognized in the meetings with employers and graduates. Despite of the existing financial pressure there is no sign that the University has softened admittance procedures for students or lowered the quality of education. Neither the meeting with about 100 students nor the meeting with only five students opened any weaknesses. Both student groups were not very active or critical. Problems were not mentioned. Even the recent increase of student fees and the lack of canteen and other facilities for students were not mentioned. There was only one student with experience of a mobility programme.

In the meeting with graduates it turned out that most of the attendees were employed by AUI or by units linked to AUI. Hence it was no surprise that also this group did not have any criticism. I do think that the meetings with huge groups of students selected by the university and graduates employed by the institution do not really contribute to a good knowledge of the institution. It would be better to choose a small group of students randomly from different class-rooms for interviews.

The University's statement to emphasize student-centred learning has also to be scrutinised. It is not fully clear what the AUI really has done in this direction. Student-centred learning refers to new teaching skills, small staff-student ratios, classrooms with appropriate infrastructure, e-learning instruments, electives in curricula, balance between theory and praxis, etc. I could not find many of these things during the visit. There exist very modern medical equipment in several labs, but it is not clear how much the students are using this new equipment. The computer lab is excellent but not open for students besides lectures. I could not find any evidence for the use of e-learning instruments and my general impression is that even the administration of AUI does not use an integrated electronic information system. Many data is recorded only manually. Students do not have any space where they can discuss and learn autonomously in groups. The lack of space for teaching and administrative staff is obvious.

Recommendations:

- Continue and increase efforts for implementing all Bologna aspects (student-centred learning, involvement of stakeholders, internationalisation, employability, etc.).
- Formalise the involvement of stakeholders in the discussion of curricula.
- Improve the spatial situation for students and staff.

7. Research and Service to Society

During the last years AUI has made progress with respect to strengthen its research. The University has to be commended for a recently acquired European project. But international visibility of AUI research is still a problem field. Research is highly fragmented. Till now the income from research projects and services to society is negligible.

Recommendations:

- Set priorities in research in order to make research at AUI better visible.
- Support publications in English language, be more active in international research groups and increase research co-operations with other institutions.
- Strengthen and improve services to the region. Present examples of good consultancies and services to potential partners and increase regional partnerships.

8. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is an essential element of European higher education. It refers to student and staff mobility, language policy, curricula, joint study and double degree programmes, collaborative research, conference attendance etc. At the moment AUI cannot show many activities in this field. Out of about 100 students attending the meeting with the ARACIS team only one had international experience.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation activities (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility of staff and students, research collaborations, etc.).
- Orientate curricula according to international standards and benchmarks.
- Try to attract more international students by providing information (handbook) for international students on AUI's homepage.

9. Final Remarks

Although AUI is a young higher education institution, it already plays a certain role in the region. In order to guarantee its continuity and sustainability AUI should continue with improvements (especially regarding governing structure, premises, Bologna ideas). My remarks and comments should assist "Apollonia" University to pursue this path.