

AVRAM IANCU UNIVERSITY CLUJ NAPOCA EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2014

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of AVRAM IANCU UNIVERSITY CLUJ NAPOCA as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 29 October and Friday 31 October 2014. In this process as a foreign expert evaluator I was responsible for establishing an overview of the Avram Iancu University with focusing on the main points of continuous improvement of quality and future development aspects with outlining the main dimensions of present and future challenges of the university. Before the three day long visit I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. During my stay in Cluj Napoca with the help of the colleagues of Avram Iancu University I had the possibility to insight the documentations of the evaluation process and to collect useful and important information about the university.

Background

The Academic Association "Avram Iancu", a non-profit organization was established and started to operate in 1992, and later, on the base of this association a private university started its work and became accredited by the Law no. 195 of 24 October 2008 in Cluj Napoca. From that time the Avram Iancu University is an independent institution of higher education in Romania.

Cluj Napoca where this university exists is the capital of Cluj County and with its more than 320.000 inhabitants the town is the second largest city in Romania where there are several private and state universities offering wide selection of higher

educational programs at different levels. The Avram Iancu University is one private institution from this supply.

President of the Academic Association "Avram Iancu" and the founding member of the institution is Univ. dr. Achim Mihailescu who has played an active role in the life of the university. Mr. Mihailescu also taught courses in different universities in the United States (Department of Romanian Culture and Civilization "Nicolae Iorga" Columbia University in New York, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis). He is a member of the American Sociological Association and also a member of the New York Academy of Sciences. In 2001, he received the title of Honorary Citizen of Cluj-Napoca. As a well known academic figure he has a rich scientific and cultural activity.

The newly formed institution had managed to follow up the local market needs of transition economies as in the 1990s there was a great demand for graduated laborforce with good competencies in many fields, like everywhere in Central-Eastern Europe. These market needs had resulted relatively great number of students for years which had been guaranteed the financial stability, sustainability, and the successful and uninterrupted operation of the university. The institution has focused on full time education and has offered education programs at BA level. It is important to point out that beside the younger generation many adults have attended the different programs as the flexibility of the institution let them to attend these full time BA programs. After this successful period the market needs were changed parallel with the growing activity of the competitors who were often offered the same education programs. These processes certainly resulted significant changes in the number of students, and the financial sustainability of the institution has become more and more difficult from this time.

Mission and objectives

Avram Iancu 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. Strategic objectives can be found in the self evaluation report of the university contain general information about the objectives, universal plans but it is not clear that what is the vision of the institution about the future in this new situation where the university has to cope with the challenges of financial sustainability and the decreasing number of students.

This university is a small university which offers programs basically in a more flexible way than the other universities in Cluj Napoca. The educational programs and the administrative processes are run by a small group of full-time staff. The number of enrolled students is less from year to year and parallel with the decreasing demand the local competitors certainly offer more attractive possibilities to learn. Of course this situation is not desperate totally but to get a better position the university needs to invest to the infrastructure, human resources, needs to work up proper processes, has to develop new and attractive programs for the potential students, has to set up (new) connections with the employers and businesses, has to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the didactic field; has to develop scientific research; has to develop, perfect and diversify the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students; there is also an urgent need for permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework, and infrastructure. It is obvious that to reach these aims needs time, systematic work and money – it is impossible to implement them from one day to another, but without a strong financial background and strong and committed management it could be hardly realized in a longer period of time.

Management, organizational structures, human resources

As a relatively small institution, the appropriate and expected managerial structures and other organizational units of the university has to operate the same way like a

greater university. The operation of an institution must rely 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.

According to the self evaluation report, beside the small number of administrative staff the present full-time teaching staff of the university is *31 full-time teachers: 6 professors, 5 associate professors, 15 lecturers, 5 assistant professors and 7 associate colleagues*. This number was certainly higher few years ago but according to the fact that some education programs and specializations stopped to operate from this schoolyear, some of the earlier tenured teachers left the institution. Most teachers have a PhD or they are PhD candidates.

In the evaluation process it would have been much better to meet with most of the full-time staff and with some colleagues who teach in the different programs but not full-time employees of the institution, but certainly bring their important contribution to the teaching programs with their specific knowledge, field expertise and competencies. The full-time teaching staff certainly doesn't spend lots of time in the university, most of them probably have other jobs.

Educational programs

During the 22 years of operation there were several faculties and majors in the university. For the schoolyear 2014-2015 on the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport the specialization Physical Therapy and Special Motricity, and on the Faculty of Administration and Economics the specialization of Public Administration has remained from the earlier wider supply. The university has implemented the Bologna Process principles which allow the institute to connect to the European Higher Education Area. The present number of the students doesn't reach the maximum number of students who can attend the different educational programs.

The programs of the university are offering learning possibilities not just for younger people but even for older generations who are working somewhere and attending the courses in the same time. Adults require different assumptions and more flexibility to adjust the learning processes to the daily working activities or family commitments. It is important to point out that the university does not manage this special segment as an important strategic group of students, although it could be a diversification path to focus more on adult learning.

As a part of the evaluation I was participating in a meeting where the employers had the possibility to make remarks and share experiences about the university and its graduated students. Only one employer came. The university has not really established strong connections with companies, public institutions, or nonprofit organizations in connection with training and field work: the university only has good cooperation with medical institutions on the field of Physical Therapy and Special Motricity. The lack of these well operating connections do not rise the quality of the education processes, but certainly could be very useful tool to improve the level of practical knowledge beside the theoretical parts.

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 and other incomes. Without state support Avram Iancu University has to cover its expenses with its own incomes which means, that the most significant part is coming from student fees. The decreasing number of the students could be a danger to sustain the educational processes in a good level for a longer period of time. Right now the university doesn't have research contracts at institutional level, so this practically does not result extra budget incomes for the university.

The university has outsourced the financial activities and accounting, and works with a local accounting firm and has accounts and deposits in the Romanian Commercial Bank.

The financial sustainability depends on the future ability to increase the number of students and to find outside resources parallel with presenting a better performance in educational processes.

International visibility and collaboration

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and cultural fields a higher education institution has to develop and manage connections with its academic and social-economic environment. In case of Avram Iancu University these connections seem to be accidental, non-formalized and mainly mean the personal connections and activities of the academic staff (grants, national and international projects). The university doesn't have students from abroad, exchange partnerships are missing, and the university doesn't really use the potential advantages of local and regional actors.

The research activity basically can be seen at individual level. The university does not really promote the teaching staff participation in research programs, and the level of cooperation and collaboration is not significant with industrial and services companies, universities or other state institutions. Although there are "research laboratories" in the building of the university, these spaces are just rooms, and nothing refers to intensive research activity. The existing scientific research is basically the personal research activity of the teachers, although the results and outcomes certainly could be used in the education process. The university has a review, a biannual journal "Thinking, Culture & Society".

As some specializations have stopped to operate from this year, according to the agreements of Avram Iancu University with other Romanian higher education institutions, students finish their studies in another universities (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu – Management; Faculty of Physical Education and Sport - University of Oradea).

Material resources

Avram Iancu University has two locations with spaces for education and administrative activities. On one hand this capacity is enough to meet the needs of the students, but on the other hand, as the number of the students has decreased in the last years, the university is probably not using some of these units and there are certain spaces which are practically empty.

University "Avram Iancu" from Cluj Napoca has its own library, which offer direct access for the students to classified information in various fields.

Illustrative and visual aids, equipments, installations and IT is used for the educational process are not very impressive and some of them up to date – it seems that earlier the university paid much more attention and spent more time, energy and money for the continuous improvement of quality and permanent development.

Students, public information

According to the self evaluation report of the institution, in the 2013/2014 academic year, the university had 325 students. The number of students is certainly less in this schoolyear, which could result instability in a longer run if the university is not able to attract potential students in the near future.

Every year the university organizes an open day in the last week of the academic year. The university offers certain financial assistance for students who have financial challenges. The institution doesn't have foreign students although there are

some students from the Romanian diaspora who are attending the university. The Avram Iancu University has not entered to the ERASMUS program, so students and teachers do not have the possibility for this type of mobility. Due to the present level of resources, the university is not offering a wide range of social, cultural services for students.

The basic public information is available on the homepage of the university (<http://www.uai-cluj.ro>) in Romanian language, although an old English version of this page with limited information is also available on the internet (<http://www.uai-cluj.ro/index.php?id=1&lang=en>), but these informations are basically not relevant, show an earlier state of the institution with much wider educational programs.

According to the self evaluation report, the marketing communication of "Avram Iancu" University of Cluj Napoca is done through media (publications and advertisements in the written, audio and video mass-media), through the website, and some specialized events.

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. To summarize my remarks and observations, I think that the present performance of the university is lower than the level of limited confidence.

The earlier mentioned decline of the total number of students could have resulted a decision making situation earlier when the management of the university would have had to perceive the changing conditions and would have had to pay much more attention for the future. Similar to other economic, social or environmental situations, it could be an important question to start to change the given processes without intensive negative feedbacks or the changes only happen as an effect of the


negative processes? Of course it is very simply to say that the first variation is better, because there is basically no guarantee that an university would make good decisions or manage to choose correct diversification paths, but I think that in a situation where certain signals has showed that the future sustainability of this private institution has not been that stable as it was few years ago, the management of the university would have tried to cope more intensively with these challenges. Unfortunately, it seems that in the situation of the Avram Iancu University these processes did not start in time, or the attempts to stabilize the state of the institution have not been successful enough to diversify the educational programs and attract more potential students.

It is also not strengthening the present situation of Avram Iancu University that the institution has to keep the same rules that big universities have to keep. I think this private university was focusing on maintaining somehow the more and more worsening situation without any significant change and tried to manage their remained resources to keep the system work which in a given level still meets the needs of the present students. There are certain signs that there were some attempts to find potential diversification paths, but it seems that at the time of the present evaluation these activities does not show convincingly the sufficient level of operation for a longer period of time.

If the university gets a chance to continue its activity in the next years, the institutions should have a strong, involved and motivated management with realistic plans and ideas to find the future development paths but in this case the university certainly has to reposition and build itself again and have to start educational programs that meet the needs of the potential target groups and attract a sufficient number of students to reach financial stability for a longer run. The field of Physical Therapy and Special Motricity could be a base for this changes but this program alone is certainly not enough to sustain a university, further development is needed to diversify the educational supply. Of course this stabilization needs time, strong

efforts and external financial assistance or investment because the institution probably does not have financial resources for this transition and as a private university the institution does not have a state finance. To show a much better performance it would be also very important to strengthen the local, national and international visibility, increase the research activity at institutional level and enter into bilateral contracts with other universities, economic and local governmental actors as well.

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Iván Zádori PhD
Assistant Professor
University of Pécs
Faculty of Adult Education and
HumanResources Development