

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 “George Bacovia” din Bacău, România

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

14th December 2018

em.Univ.-Prof.Dr.Winfried Müller
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

Peer of several
European Quality Assurance Agencies

1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the University “George Bacovia” (UGB) in Bacău for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from December 5 to 7, 2018. Beside the institutional evaluation, the study programme Law and the Master domain Management of UGB were selected for assessment too. This evaluation of UGB follows the ARACIS-visit in 2016, when the institution received the ARACIS rating “lack of confidence”.

This evaluation with the ARACIS team was actually my second visit to UGB. I have visited UGB for an institutional evaluation by the European University Association already in 2014. All in all, I have participated during the last 18 years already in nearly 50 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions in nine European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence, the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with UGB but also give international perspectives. My focus is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof.univ. Dr. Simona Lache and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ. Dr. Răzvan Nistor for conducting this evaluation process in a very efficient and careful way. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mrs. Carmen Mirian 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 Rector Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Lupu from UGB for the friendly welcome as well as to the Dean Lect.univ. Dr. Violeta Urban for the perfect organisation of my visit.

2. Organisational Details of the University “George Bacovia” in Bacău

The University “George Bacovia” in Bacău (UGB) was founded in 1992. It is a private accredited higher education institution in Romania, and operates under Law no. 237/2002. In connection with the Law of National Education 2011, UGB was ranked among the “teaching and learning universities”.

The city of Bacău is the capital of the county of Bacău located in the central part of Moldavia. Despite of the decreasing number of students and consequently liquidation of study programmes during the last decade, UGB still plays a certain role for the cultural, social and economic development of the region Moldavia and the North-East of Romania, especially in the fields of law and management. There exists also a public university in Bacău, the “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, with considerably more students and study programmes, however covering different areas.

The University houses in its own building in Pictor Aman street no. 96 in Bacău, which was constructed between 1998 and 2008. UGB is organised in one single faculty, the Faculty of Economics, Juridical and Administrative Sciences, with the undergraduate programmes Economy of Commerce, Tourism and Services, Management, Law, Public Administration, and the master programmes Business Management, Management of Public Administration Institutions. Several more undergraduate and master programmes entered into liquidation recently.

UGB has fully implemented the Bologna three cycle study structure. In the academic year 2018/19 there were 616 students enrolled, namely 456 in the Bachelor programmes and 160 students in the Master programmes.

Currently the University has a total of 25 teaching staff and 11 vacant positions, which gives a coverage degree of 70%.

According to the provided information and observations during the visit, the building of UGB is very well kept. Classrooms and laboratories are equipped properly, but the computer infrastructure needs replacement of the hard- and the software. The building gives also access to handicapped persons.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the tuition-fees of students. According to the provided information the revenue in 2017 was 2.211.236 Lei, compared with expenditures of 1.311.902 Lei for the didactic and auxiliary teaching staff. In 2018 the revenue will be 2.258.355 Lei plus the amount of 985.658 Lei for ERASMUS and European projects. Nevertheless, UGB is in a critical financial situation caused by decreasing student numbers during several years in the past. Hence big investments are not possible at the moment.

The University is governed by the Senate and the Administrative Council. The Senate consists of 7 members (5 academics and 2 students). The Administrative Council is formed by three founders of UGB. This Council takes all important (financial) decisions for UGB.

3. Outline of the Visit

During the last years, the University has already taken some steps of improvement, considering recommendations and requirements of the ARACIS evaluations 2014 and 2016 as well as recommendations resulting from the institutional evaluation of the European University Association in 2014.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

UGB has elaborated an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of 52 pages and 196 annexes for this ARACIS evaluation. As usual in Romania, the SER is not very self-critical and serves mainly to prove that the ARACIS requirements for the study programmes and the institution are fulfilled. The SER does not discuss any perspectives for the future.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the University “George Bacovia” in Bacău (UGB) began in the evening of December 4, 2016, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Hotel Dumbrava in Bacău.

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

Wednesday, December 5

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on December 5 at 9:00 am, in the Senate meeting room on the second floor of the University building. Rector Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Lupu, representatives of the owners and the teaching and the administrative staff of UGB

welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The Mission Director Prof.univ. Dr. Simona Lache and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ. Dr. Răzvan Nistor presented the ARACIS team and explained the evaluation procedure.

In the course of the first day, the ARACIS team performed the usual activities. After a short internal ARACIS meeting in order to discuss the focus and organisational details of the evaluation we visited for about 75 minutes the university building. We started on the ground floor with two big aulas, several lecture rooms and the university library. Climbing successively up to the third floor we met several on-going classes with small groups of students, observed staff and students working in seminar rooms, passed by staff offices, and finally visited the auditorium maximum with 250 seats at the top of the building. The facilities could accommodate many more students and staff than it is the case at present.

At 11:00am we had in addition to the standard ARACIS programme a meeting with about 20 teachers of UGB.

At 14:50pm I had a personal meeting with Rector Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Lupu.

In the late afternoon, I attended the meetings of the ARACIS team with about 35 students, with 20 graduates and finally a meeting with 20 employers.

Thursday, December 6

In the morning I arranged a meeting with the former Rector of UGB, Prof.univ. Dr. Tatiana Puiu.

For the later morning the ARACIS team had arranged additional meetings with members of the Administrative Council (founders), with the President of the Ethic Commission, with the President of the QA Commission, with the President of the Senate and with the Director of the Didactic and Research Department.

After lunch we had a meeting with the Director of the Career Centre.

All these meetings served to obtain a clear picture of the current state of UGB.

At 18:30pm the ARACIS team met for a debriefing. The different experts including me gave a short presentation of their findings and views.

Friday, December 7

In the morning, all Team members finalized their documents. The evaluation visit ended with a meeting of the ARACIS team with the representatives of UGB at 11:30am. Impressions and results of the evaluation visit were presented to the leaders of UGB. Rector Prof.univ. Dr. Neculai Lupu thanked the ARACIS team for its careful work. The President of the Administrative Council Prof.univ. Dr. Dumitru Bonta expressed also his thanks and stated that in consideration of the active role of students in modern universities the Council will include a representative of the students in the future.

4. Governance and Institution

The governing bodies of UGB have developed a culture of consensus and co-operation to govern the institution. But all important decisions are made by the three founders in the Administrative Council. As a consequence there is a feeling of demotivation for strategic planning among the academics of UGB, especially within the younger university members. In response of the ARACIS ratings in 2014 and 2016 some minor improvements and modifications have been implemented. But the speed and the extent of changes are very limited. Some problematic study programmes have started the process of liquidation. First steps have been taken to recruit additional full-time teachers. Other alterations are realized

only on an informal base (e.g. rector is invited to the Council of Administration). I understand that the management and the members of UGB suffer from the current critical situation of the institution. Nevertheless, there is still no university-wide discussion on the future of the institution. The areas of law and management are certainly of relevance for Bacău and the region of Moldavia. But the current problems will not be solved only by an improved university marketing, the recommencement of suspended study programmes and the hope for some State funding for special courses.

Caused by different reasons (shortage of human resources, lack of motivation, influence of the founders, etc.) there is a lack of strategic thinking and decision making among the academic members of the institution. This is reflected by the current Strategic Plan of UGB, which is very general and not future oriented. The management seems to be concentrated to handle the day-to-day business and there is not enough capacity and motivation for the academic management of UGB to work on a strategy of sustainability for the institution in the changing environment. The managers of UGB are very well aware of the challenges. Despite of the fact that Romanian universities generally suffer from a lack of institutional co-operation, the leaders of UGB know that co-operations with other institutions could be essential for the University. A good deal with Vasile Alecsandri University could be aspirational for similar co-operations between state universities and private institutions in Romania.

Modern universities need a strong rectorate in order to react to existing challenges and threats. The Administrative Council should withdraw from the executive management of the institution and define only the general framework and monitor the university managers.

If the owners/founders do not want to vote for an ordered closing of UGB, I recommend to give **more weight to the young university members** and to set appropriate steps of innovation.

- Strengthen the position of the rector and give her/him more power and the right to form her/his team for change and innovation.
- Let young university members participate in the discussion on the future of UGB.
- Reconsider the internal structure. A university with one single faculty is somehow curious (duplication of work between Rector - Dean, Senate - Faculty Council). UGB could impress the Ministry by an unconventional step in order to save recourses. Why not let the Rector taking over the duties of the Dean and the Senate taking care of the duties of the Faculty Council and eliminate the Faculty level at all.
- Formalise official links with external stakeholders (including public authorities, economy, industry, etc.) and establish a forum where the importance and future of UGB is discussed. The “public” should state if they want UGB to go on and assist UGB on its way into the future! UGB can only survive if it is supported by local politicians, the local economy and society!
- Consider future alternative options for UGB such as
 - become a faculty of a larger University in Bacau or Iasi,
 - the creation of a North-East Romanian University as an umbrella institution for private universities in the region.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already mentioned on other occasions, an ethic commission composed only by members from the institution will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from UGB and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Assurance

UGB has set up procedures for quality assurance. The teaching staff at UBW seems to be fully aware of the importance of QA and high quality teaching. The students take an active part in the in the evaluation of teaching. An antiplagiarism system has been installed. However, some procedures for quality assurance seem to be very bureaucratic.

Recommendations:

- Try to reduce bureaucratic efforts and avoid redundancies within quality assurance procedures.
- Promote the importance and benefits of quality assurance.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality of the education at UGB is generally recognized. Neither the meeting with students nor the meetings with graduates and employers and the teachers disclosed any severe problems. Students and graduates were commonly positive. Some employers argued for a more specialized education of students for their enterprises.

Currently UGB seems to fulfil the requirements set by ARACIS for its study programmes or is on a good way to meet these requirements. Several programmes with problems have been entered into liquidation recently. First steps have been taken to establish more full-time resident teachers. But given the size and the profile of UGB it is clear that there are barriers for the realisation of some Bologna ideas and European requirements (e.g. mobility, modularisation of programmes, shift to student centred education, more selective subjects, focus on employability, international projects, etc.). The involvement of stakeholders into curricula discussions seems to be informal and based on personal relations. Participation of students into research is not really visible. Support services for students preparing them for the labour market (career centre, entrepreneurship, etc.) are not very active.

Recommendations:

- Include more optional courses into programmes and fully modularise programmes.
- Increase autonomous student work and self-learning parts.
- Involve stakeholders systematically into curricula discussions.
- Increase assistance for students looking for an internship and strengthen the activities to facilitate the start of graduates into the working world.

7. Research and Service to Society

Research is not a very strong point at UGB but there has been made progress to make research more visible. As frequently observed in Romania, also in the case of UGB, co-operations with neighbouring universities and with regional and private actors in research are not numerous. Consulting activities are not very strong and the few existing ones are based on personal contacts and not on institutional relationships.

Recommendations:

- Expand the co-operation with other research institutions (especially with Vasile Alecsandri University) in order to reach critical mass of research groups.
- **Strengthen and extend relations with the region.** Present examples of good research and consultancies to potential partners. **Try to sign mutual contracts of co-operation in order to make income from collaborations sustainable.**
-

8. Internationalisation

As already mentioned, the small size of UGB does not really favour international activities. In addition, the field of law, beside the aspect of European law, is not really an international discipline. Nevertheless, national co-operations in the area of law could be strengthened. And in the field of management could be done much more with respect to mobility of staff and students, joint study programmes, collaborative research, etc.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility, research collaborations).

9. Final Remarks

In any case some unconventional steps will be necessary in order to strengthen the sustainability of UGB. The founders of UGB will have to give up some power and influence for this purpose. But why not leave more freedom to the nearly 30 years old child UGB after some excellent years of birth and growing up.

Considering that UGB has taken recently some steps of improvement I suggest to give the institution another chance for changes and innovation.

My remarks and recommendations should assist UGB to find a successful way into the future.

Winfried Müller

em.Univ.-Prof.Dr.Winfried Müller