

ROMANIAN – AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, BUCHAREST EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2021

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of the Romanian-American University, Bucharest (RAU) as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The online evaluation took place between Monday 8 February and Friday 12 February 2021. Before the online evaluation process, I received the self-evaluation report of the institution. With the help of the colleagues of Romanian-American University I had the possibility to collect every useful and important information about the university. My report is following the structure of the self evaluation report of the institution.

Background, legal framework, missions and objectives

Romanian-American University has been set up in 1991 in Bucharest as a higher education and research institution with a private, non-profit character. The founder of the university was Professor Ion Smedescu, he became the first rector of the University and also president of the Romanian-American Foundation for the Promotion of the Education and Culture. In the first year, 1991, 1772 students started their studies in the institution. During the next years, the university started to establish most of the present educational programs and specializations. The Romanian-American University, as a private higher education institution, is a part of the Romanian national system of education. According to the self-evaluation report of the institution, the Romanian-American University was founded with the purpose of promoting the American progressive educational values combined with the rich internationally recognized academic traditions of the Romanian educational system. This special

orientation has been an important priority in the last 30 years of operation of the institution.

According to the self-evaluation report of the university, the main mission of the institution is to promote knowledge and innovation by providing a unique learning experience, research, and development. The university is permanently trying to increase the quality of activities, to operate as a well manageable institution at national and international level with integrating the university to the European Higher Education System. The university is permanently focusing on to increase the efficiency and competitiveness, develop 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, and concentrating on the permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework and infrastructure.

The Charta of the university provides the guidelines regarding the structure, strategy, and principles of functioning and development of the university and regulates its activities. The Charta provisions have been harmonized with both the Romanian legislation and the principles of the European Space of Higher Education. Among the main patterns of the institution there is also a focus on the flexibility and mobility, scientific research, international visibility, continuous improvement and development of the education process and services related to the education, as well as the consolidation of existing specializations, improvement of administrative and financial activity, efficiency, and permanent investment to the university infrastructure and material base of the education. Although these aims and priorities are basically reflecting correctly to the present challenges of the institution, the offered programs can be found in other Romanian higher education institutions in Bucharest and in the country as well. Of course, it is not a necessity for a private higher education institution to develop permanently new programs but would be an important activity to attract

groups of potential students with new educational programs that meet the needs of the market, and these market needs are not static at all.

Romanian-American 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 and educational fields and it has to offer attractive study programs which are based on the demands of the students. Students are the most important parts of these processes: besides donations, sponsorships, grants and other research resources they 'produce' the own resources of the institution and make the system financially sustainable. It seems that the answers of Romanian-American University for these permanently appearing challenges are basically successful. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the institution is forced to cope with the market changes and has to work permanently on developing its educational supply to meet the needs of the potential students.

Management and organizational structures

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. According to the information, the academic and the administrative leadership of Romanian-American University have the appropriate competencies to do their work correctly. The Romanian-American University of Bucharest has a flexible, balanced and qualitative management structure, which ensures a democratic, transparent and non-discriminatory decision-making process, including through clear election mechanisms for students' representatives, as well as of teaching staff in the management structures. Academic and administrative structure

is described in the Charta of the institution. School is the functional body that draws up and manages the study programs.

The general strategy of the Romanian-American University of Bucharest considers the integration in the structure of the European environment and the internationalization of the education and scientific research activities. Since 2020 the university has a new management team. The strategic goals are focusing on increasing the national and international recognition, strengthening the internationalization, increasing the quality of education, supporting, and consolidating the research and innovation activities, rethinking the partnerships and connections of the institution and to strengthening the entrepreneurial culture and creating a sustainable university vision. The strategic program of the University and the yearly operational programs are clear to the academic community and can be found on the university's webpage.

Material resources

Romanian-American University is operating in its own building in Bucharest and has the material base for education processes: classes and seminars halls, laboratories, library, centers, bookstore, offices as well. On campus, according to the self-evaluation report, there is the Students' Club, a Work and Travel agency, the "Murray Rothbard" Center for Political Economics and Business, the Center for Career Guidance and Counseling, the Center for European Studies and Research, and the Department of Asian Studies as well. From 2014, the university also offers sport facilities for students and employees, too. According to the received information and the self-evaluation report, 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 serve the educational process well, the university has to spend time, energy, and money to keep and maintain these conditions in a good level.

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. Overall, the university meets the demand of European standards. It is also important to point out that from last year, due to the COVID situation, the university, just like other higher education institutions, has started to organize the educational activities online. According to the received information, the university managed to cope with this atypical situation quite well. On one hand, because of the online solutions, the current use and utilization of the infrastructure is certainly lower than the previous periods, but the university must pay permanent attention to maintain and develop the infrastructure of education.

Teaching staff and educational programs

In the 2019-2020 academic year, the number of the teaching staff was 125 at the Romanian-American University of Bucharest, 26 professors, 36 associate professors, 43 lecturers and 20 assistants were working in the institution. The age structure of the teachers is good, 76% of them are between 35 and 49 years old. According to my personal experiences, the management and the teaching staff of the university has proper competencies and qualifications which certainly results a good level of performance of the university. Associated teachers with temporary employment contract also help the educational process of the institution. It is important to point out that these colleagues with their experiences could make the educational process much more practice oriented. Professors, researchers, and scholars from abroad permanently play an important role in the operation of the institution: their knowledge, experiences and scientific contribution is an integral part of the educational process.

The university is offering BA and MA study programs in Romanian and English languages. Since 1991, a permanent diversification of the educational supply can be seen. Right now, the third level, PhD studies are 'missing' from the educational programs, but a doctoral school is among the plans of the institution. The number of students is changing from year to year, but the changes are not so critical and there are also some educational programs where the numbers are growing. Due to the

permanently changing higher education environment, needs and expectations of the students, it is very important to maintain the present numbers and if it is possible, attract more students in the next years. The university has to pay intensive attention in connection with the changes in the demands of the potential students. The internationalization also should be an important priority in the future, the institution has to make steps to grow the numbers of students on the existing English language programs and may develop new educational programs that reflect appropriately for the changing needs and attract new groups of potential students.

During the virus crisis, the university has managed the online education quite well: in this process it was very useful that the institution had earlier experiences and practices in distance education and e-learning. It is also important to emphasize that some parts of the online education should be kept after the COVID situation is going to be over: from the feedbacks of the students, it seems that some of them prefer certain online practices.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, RAU is a self-financing university, establishing funds from the annual school tuition taxes, donations and sponsorships, research contracts, or other interests. According to the details the financial activities – incomes and expenses of Romanian-American University are well-balanced. It is important to point out that without state support Romanian-American University 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 number of the students and the present amount of fees paid by them seems to be enough to sustain the university processes in the present level. Annual budget of revenue and expenditure at the institution level approved by the Senate, where the schools also get resources to cover some of their expenses. According to the received information, it is important to maintain and increase the present number of students in the future to make the system permanently sustainable. Parallel with this, the university should continuously

focus on finding other outside resources, extra budget incomes, grants and projects that help to keep a well-balanced financial performance.

Students

The number of students enrolled in the BA educational programs in the academic year 2019 – 2020 was 2355, out of whom 2035 in full time studies and 320 in part-time studies. For the MA studies, there are 433 students enrolled in this period. According to the data and the information received on the online meetings with the students as a part of the evaluation process, large share of the university graduates manages to find their place in the labor market, although not everyone is working on the fields of their studies.

The university offers programs certainly more flexible ways than state universities for students and for those who work: these forms of education meet the needs of many potential students in Bucharest and the region. There is a Counselling and Career Development Center at Romanian-American University as well. The university is also granting scholarships and some other forms of material support from their own resources for the students.

The public information can be found on the Romanian-American University site, which is one of the most important parts of the communication with the external environment including information about the education process in Romanian and English language. The English version of the site is quite good. The university uses social media intensively to reach present and potential students as well.

Students and teachers also have a wide range of possibilities to participate in mobility programs. The university has many partnerships and cooperation with European higher education institutions and universities from overseas. Although these connections are operating quite well, it is recommended to maintain and manage these contracts permanently with the partner institutions and permanently increase the

number of students and staff members taking part in mobility activities. Even in the period of COVID, when the personal contacts are missing, and nobody knows when this situation is going to change, the institution must pay attention to find the appropriate management of its contacts if the present situation drags on and the online world lasts longer.

As the part of the evaluation process there were online meetings with the present students, graduates, and employers as well. The participation of the students was very intensive, especially the meeting with the graduates was 'popular', together with the members of evaluation team, the number of the participants was almost 90. This high interest shows clearly that students considered the participation important and during the meetings some of them also had the possibility to share their opinion and experiences. Due to the shortness of time, many students wrote their impressions only in the chat function of the online platform. Students were very active, I found them very open minded and intelligent. They seem to be very loyal to their university and pay a lot of attention to their studies, and, if I understood well, they were basically satisfied with the university and the educational processes.

Research activities

The importance of research activities seems to be significant in the university and it is permanently an important priority of the institution. In case of the universities of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources become more and more important in financing research activities. The present project orientation of the institution seems to be very significant in this moment, but it would be important in the future to pay permanent attention to participate in new research activities, projects, and initiatives. Additionally, Romanian-American University should continue to organize conferences, scientific events and academic activities which would be very important for strengthening the present national and international visibility of the institution and beside the 'outsider' lecturers and participants it also gives possibility for the students and teachers from the institution to present their own research results. Participating in

projects and research are not only possibilities for the staff, but for the students as well.

According to the self-evaluation report of the institution, in 2019, 110 articles were published in the university journals, 17 books were published at national publishing houses, and 8 at international ones. Many studies were published in periodicals with impact factor. In the same period, the university organized 5 summer schools and 14 scientific conferences. The university also has the Romanian-American University Press publishing academic and research journals related to the study fields: right now there are 8 journals operating under the aegis of the university.

There are many international connections of the university which is an important tool to increase the level of international visibility of the institution and could strengthen the scientific research activities of the university as well. The university also uses the advantages of Erasmus and the importance and proper management of this exchange program and enter new bilateral contracts with universities give the possibility for students and staff members taking part in mobility activities funded and supported by the EU.

International Relations

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific and educational fields a higher education institution has to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. Romanian-American University pays more and more attention for collaboration with universities, or other institutions in Europe and all over the world. To manage these connections effectively relies on the available financial background, the level of intention to establish and manage real partnerships and cooperation from which the partner institutions could benefit and finally, how much work is invested in managing these relationships properly, if partner institutions have the same level of interest. In case of Romanian-American University it seems that

there is strong intention that parallel with managing the earlier international directions, establish new partnerships to raise the level of international visibility and collaboration.

The international orientation was in focus from the beginning. This special focus is an important comparative advantage and competitiveness factor of the institution, so it is also important in the future to manage, develop and implement the strategy of internationalization of Romanian-American University, as well as to promote its international image, educational programs and research activities in Europe and worldwide. With the participation of the colleagues of the old and the newly established partner institutional connections, it is an important priority – even in the online world – to organize scientific conferences and academic events.

The Romanian - American University of Bucharest has signed partnership agreements with universities across North and Central America, Europe and Asia and the international experience is an essential component in the education of students and training of academics. The international relations are managed by the Department of International Relations and the Department of Asian Studies, which has 4 centers (Romanian-Japanese Studies Center, Romanian-Korean Studies Center, Romanian-Chinese Studies Center and the Romanian-Azerbaijani Studies Center). The operation of these centers is supported by the embassies of these countries.

Quality assurance

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 quality assurance within the university can be defined as the set of organizational structures, responsibilities, regulations,

standards, procedures, tools, and resources contributing to high quality educational services at all stages.

The management of the Romanian - American University has had a systematic and integrated approach to quality management, considering the University as a complex system whose subsystems are the schools, departments, research centers and laboratories, the library, and the administrative services. This approach enabled the management at all levels in the implementation and continuous improvement of the Quality Management System of the Romanian-American University. In accordance with the internal provisions, the Quality Assurance and Assessment Commission (CEAC) coordinates the quality assurance of the study programs offered by the university and monitors the effective operation of the Quality Management System approved by the Senate of the university.

The university quality policy focuses on the permanent improvement of all activities, and the Senate ensures that the quality policy must suit the goal and the institutional mission, meet the quality standards; ensure the appropriate institutional framework for setting quality objectives, be communicated, and permanently analyzed in order to be improved and fit domestically and internationally. The present and the previous Strategic Program of the university contains many strategic objectives related to the quality of the education process and the scientific research.

Reviewing the structure and activities of the quality assurance of the university, these processes seem to operate well, but the main principle and objective has to be that quality assurance must become the part of the organizational culture of the institution. The nation-wide competitive advantages of the university justify the need for the continuous quality assurance: 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 and improve the quality of teaching and research processes.

Conclusion

My report is based on what I have experienced; what I have read and have heard before and during the online evaluation. I hope that some of my comments will help the university management. Overall, the Romanian-American University meets the needs of educational and professional training specific standards, the social and economic development needs of the community and European standards of education and scientific research as well. I recommend the high level of confidence rating for the university with emphasizing the following:

- The university should pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students, changing educational conditions in the online world during the COVID period, etc.)
- The university has to adapt to the new needs of the students where permanent improvement of quality has to be in focus; keeping in mind that adaptation needs flexibility and continuous investment in human capital.
- The university permanently has to develop its competitive factors and have keep the present role and the place in local and international market.
- RAU should continue to invest in the physical and human infrastructure and facilities when own resources, state support or any other funds allow.
- If the present pandemic situation drags on for longer time, RAU, just like other higher education institutions, has to pay intensive attention for taking the possible advantages of it and might keep some parts of the online methods when the pandemic is going to be over.
- Romanian-American University permanently has to manage its existing national and international partnerships and should establish new partnerships with institutions, associations, and companies.

- Present students are belonging to a new generation and probably this generation is going to face with the global economic, social, and environmental problems and challenges in the next decades: that is the reason why knowledge elements related to sustainability are needed in higher education as well. RAU could be among those higher education institutions who take seriously the importance of economic, social, and environmental challenges and integrate them to the curriculums of the different educational programs or develop educational programs in this field in the near future.

Finally, I would like to thank to the Rector and all the University staff for the support and help during this atypical evaluation. At last, but not least I would like to thank to ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this online evaluation process in Romania.

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