

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 “Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, România

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

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the Institutional Evaluation in blended format of the “Lucian Blaga” University in Sibiu (ULBS) by ARACIS from January 18 to 22, 2021. This evaluation during the Covid-19 pandemic was performed following the ARACIS guidelines on conducting external institutional evaluation in a blended format. ARACIS and ULBS had arranged online conferences for all the usual meetings of the on-site visit. After having solved some problems with my computer system in order to participate in the scheduled video-conferences, everything worked very well and the quality of the connections was fine. Knowing the regular ARACIS procedure for institutional evaluations was a big advantage. Also, the fact that ULBS is a well-established university made the process easier. Overall, I want to congratulate ARACIS and ULBS for having made this evaluation possible and realizing it in an excellent way.

Beside the institutional evaluation, 17 Bachelor degree study programmes were selected for assessment too. This evaluation of ULBS followed the ARACIS visit in 2014, when the institution received the ARACIS rating “High degree of confidence”.

During the last 20 years I have participated in nearly 50 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions (thereof 26 in Romania) in nine European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence, the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with ULBS 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. Ion Popa and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.Dr. Răzvan Nistor for conducting this extraordinary 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 this unusual visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Prof.univ.Dr. Sorin Radu from ULBS and to the President of the Senate Prof.univ.Dr. Ioan Bondrea for the friendly welcome as well as to Vice-Rector Prof.univ.Dr. Raluca Sassu for assisting me before and during the visit with the arrangement of individual online meetings with representatives of the University and her support with translations.

2. Organisational Details of the University “Lucian Blaga” in Sibiu (ULBS)

The University “Lucian Blaga” is located in Sibiu, the capital of the Sibiu County in the historical region Transylvania of Romania. There is a long history of higher education in the city beginning in the 16th century. In 1976 the Sibiu Higher Education Institution was established with faculties of philology and history, administrative law and mechanical engineering. By a government decree, in 1990 the Sibiu Higher Education Institution was renamed as University of Sibiu and established as a public higher education institution and a non-profit, apolitical, legal entity, governed by the Romanian Constitution, national education laws and the university charter. At the beginning the University consisted of five faculties: letters, history and law; sciences; medicine; engineering; textile and food-processing technology. One year later, the faculty of theology was included. In May 1995, the University of Sibiu was renamed after the famous Romanian writer and philosopher, Lucian Blaga, into University “Lucian Blaga” of Sibiu.

In connection with the Law of National Education 2011, ULBS was ranked among the “Teaching and Scientific Research Universities”.

ULBS plays an important role for the cultural, social and economic development of the city of Sibiu and the region, especially in the fields of cultural studies, technical sciences and medicine. According to the Law of National Education 2011 ULBS is governed by the Senate, the Rector and the Administrative Council. The Senate provides the legal framework and rules for the operational management of the institution. It consists of 85 members. The Rector together with 4 Prorectors forms the Rectorate. The members of the Rectorate are responsible for the operational management of the institution and represent the institution to the outside. The Rector, the 4 Prorectors, the Deans, the Administrative Director and one student representative form the Administrative Council of the University (15 members). The main university building is situated in Bulevardul Victoriei, Nr. 10, Sibiu, 550024. According to the provided information and the observations made during previous evaluations the patrimony of ULBS is well managed. Buildings, lecture rooms and other facilities are up to date and of international standard.

Currently ULBS is organised in 9 Faculties (Faculty of Law; Faculty of Engineering; Faculty of Letters and Arts; Faculty of Medicine; Faculty of Sciences; Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Food Industry and Environmental Protection; Faculty of Economics; Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities; Faculty of Theology), 24 Departments and the Department for Distance and Part-time Learning.

The University offers 83 Bachelor programmes and 125 Master programmes.

In the academic year 2019/20 there were 14.639 students enrolled at ULBS.

On 1st January of 2019, there were 1.028 full-time employees (637 tenured teaching and research staff members, 256 adjunct teaching staff members, 135 non-teaching staff members) working at ULBS.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the government and fees from students. According to the provided information the revenue in 2019 was 208.087.686 Lei. As ULBS owned also a saldo from previous years of 20.290.563 Lei, it was possible to finance not only ordinary activities but also additional objectives from the strategic plan.

3. Outline of the Visit

ULBS has undergone its last ARACIS institutional evaluation in 2014 and an institutional evaluation by the European University Association in 2013. Evidently, the institution has learned and benefited from these evaluations.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Report

ULBS has elaborated a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of 35 pages and 85 annexes for this ARACIS evaluation. The SER gives a very good view of the institution and describes all important items. The SWOT analysis in the SER reveals strengths and weaknesses. The quality of the SER has to be commended.

3.2 The External Institutional Evaluation in Blended Format

As already mentioned, the institutional evaluation of the University “Lucian Blaga” in Sibiu (ULBS) was prepared in accordance with the ARACIS guidelines on conducting external evaluation in a blended format.

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

Monday, January 18

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on January 18 at 9:00am with a preliminary online meeting of the ARACIS team.

In the following online meeting at 10:00am together with the representatives of ULBS the participating persons were introduced and the details of the institutional evaluation were established. Rector Prof.univ.Dr. Sorin Radu welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The main problem of this evaluation was how to perform successfully all necessary examinations in order to fulfil with the ARACIS requirements. According to the guidelines the evaluation procedure was extended from 3 to 5 days. Wherever it was possible, the usual evaluation activities were performed in form of video conferences.

At 10:35am there was an online meeting of the review team with the teaching staff of ULBS. In this meeting participated about 55 participants. Several members of ULBS reported on their activities including international and regional projects, organisation of scientific and cultural events, mobility of staff and students, supervision of students, etc.

Tuesday, January 19

The day started with another technical online meeting of the review team at 9:00am.

At 10:30am I had a private meeting with the President of the Senate (and former Rector) Prof.univ.Dr. Ioan Bondrea. We discussed the present evaluation procedure, the duties and work of the Senate and the distribution of responsibilities between the Rector and the Senate according to the Law of National Education 2011.

At 12:00am an online meeting of the review team with graduates of ULBS was scheduled. This meeting was joined by about 50 persons. As usual no severe problems were disclosed. The importance of practical parts in the curricula was stressed several times.

At 13:15pm followed an online meeting of the review team with employers and stakeholders. More than 30 persons participated in this meeting. The big range of represented institutions, many participants coming from the medical and pharma area, showed the high reputation of ULBS. The employers explained their connections with ULBS and what they expected from the graduates.

At 14:30pm I had a private online meeting with the Rector Prof.univ.Dr. Sorin Radu. We discussed the strategical planning of ULBS, co-operations with other universities, co-operations with the industry, international projects, research centres of excellence, connections with stakeholders, mobility of staff and students. The distribution of responsibilities and duties in view of the Law of National Education 2011 was another point. The last meeting of the day was a private online meeting with the Administrative Director Conf.univ.Dr. Vasile Moțoc. The main topic of our discussion concerned the financial management of the institution.

Wednesday, January 20

The evaluation work began at 09:00 am with an online technical meeting of the review team. At 12:00am there was an online meeting of the review team with students of ULBS. About 30 persons participated in this meeting. Teaching aspects especially also under pandemic restrictions, practical parts in curricula and work experience, student services, mobility, etc. were discussed. Students at ULBS were commonly positive and only some minor problems were stated.

At 13:15pm the review team had a meeting with members of the Ethic commission, followed by a meeting with the QA commission. The work of these two commissions was described and questions were answered.

Thursday, January 21

At 14:00pm I had a private video meeting with a small group of students. There were no major complaints. The wish to have more elective courses integrated into the curricula and to increase self-learning parts was mentioned.

Friday, January 22

At 11:00am the review team met for a debriefing. The different experts gave a short presentation of their findings and views.

The evaluation visit ended with a meeting of the ARACIS team with the representatives of ULBS from 12:00 to 14:00pm. Impressions and results of the evaluation visit were presented to the leaders of ULBS. Rector Prof.univ.Dr. Sorin Radu thanked the ARACIS team for their careful work under the difficult conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Governance and Institution

ULBS is a well-established and recognized university. There is a strong support for the institution by the local community. The areas represented by the Faculties of ULBS are of great relevance for the development of the region of Sibiu. During the last decade ULBS has set important steps of improvement (e.g. visibility of research, services to society, international activities, QA, recruitment of students). The strategical planning and elaboration of corresponding operational plans of ULBS have to be commended. ULBS has a very efficient university management. Rectorate, Administrative Council and Senate work in a climate of consensus und co-operation without being caught by conflicts. The former Rector and now President of the Senate is a very experienced and successful university manager. But similar to many other Romanian universities, ULBS has a favor for collective decisions and there exists a large amount of "homemade" bureaucracy. The Senate with 85 members is quite big for a modern university governing body (Vienna University has a Senate of 18 members). A modern university management has to be able to take quick decisions and to react rapidly to challenges and threats. For that purpose, a strong rectorate and clear and fast decision-making procedures are essential. But despite of the good climate between the governing bodies of ULBS, the responsibilities of the Rector and the Senate are not completely clarified and do not fully correspond (by my opinion) to the intentions of the Law of National Education 2011. The Rector is certainly not sub ordered to the Administrative Council. Furthermore, the Rector has full responsibility for the operational management of the institution and the Senate the power for all strategic decisions and general regulations. Hence, I suggest to put in the organigram of ULBS the governing bodies SENATE – RECTOR – ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL on the same top level.

With respect to the clarification of responsibilities between the Rector and the Senate in view of the Law of National Education 2011 I have doubts that the request of a doctoral student to change the supervisor is a strategic decision which has to be decided by the Senate (cf. agenda of the meeting of the Senate in December 2020). By my opinion this question should be decided by the corresponding Prorector or even Head of Department.

To another field for possible optimization, the huge range of studies at ULBS, I will return under Teaching and Learning.

Recommendations:

- Clarify roles, responsibilities and size for all decision-making bodies of ULBS with the goal of simplification and avoiding duplication. Define the responsibilities of commissions (Senate, Faculty Councils, Department Councils) and monocratic bodies (Rector, Deans, Heads of Departments) in view of the Law of National Education 2011.
- Keep key decisions at the top level and decentralize responsibilities to lower units where appropriate.
- Take care of the problem of inbreeding when recruiting new staff.
- The existence and work of the Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already mentioned on other occasions, an ethic commission formed by members only from the institution will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct of senior university members. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally – an inter-university commission with half members coming from ULBS and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Assurance

ULBS has been one of the leading institutions setting up procedures for quality assurance. The teaching staff at ULBS seems to be fully aware of the importance of QA and high-quality teaching. The students take an active part in the evaluation of teaching. An antiplagiarism system has been installed.

However, some procedures for quality assurance seem to have become routinised over time. Some students reported that critical remarks concerning bad teaching were occasionally lost in the bureaucratic jungle.

Recommendations:

- Try to reduce bureaucratic efforts and avoid redundancies within quality assurance procedures.
- Increase the visibility of course evaluation results and consequences for students.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality and importance of the education at ULBS was generally recognized in all sessions. Neither the two meetings with students nor the meetings with graduates, employers and teachers disclosed any severe problems.

But the range of studies at ULBS (83 Bachelor programmes, 125 Master programmes) is complex and huge. The study offer is very fragmented and specialized in view of the number of students and the needs of the region. Graduates of a “regional university” have to be flexible on the labor market and therefore need a certain breadth of their education and not to be formed as specialists for a small field.

Some students criticized that the Bologna ideas were not fully implemented. So, there are nearly no optional courses within the curricula.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen coordination between study programmes, eliminate large overlapping and make use of synergies where ever possible (students of related programmes could attend common courses, etc.).
- Some of the Bologna ideas such as student-centered learning, team-work, self-learning parts, elective courses, practical work and experience need to be further strengthened.

7. Research and Service to Society

Research is a strong point at ULBS. Ongoing research and research results have been made much more visible during the last years. But co-operations with neighbouring universities and with regional and private actors in research could be still strengthened. The University possesses some very interesting and important research areas. But in order to achieve excellence in research priorities have to be defined.

Recommendations:

- Expand the co-operation with other research institutions and with enterprises in order to reach critical mass of research groups and to apply for grants from European research funds.
- Further 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. Consider the foundation of a science and research park linked to ULBS financed by the local community, enterprises and possible European funds.
- Strengthen efforts to focus existing excellent research and define priorities for excellent research.
- Create additional administrative support for the realization of research co-operations as well as for the application for national and European research projects in order to reduce bureaucratic work for researchers.

8. Internationalisation

Sibiu was one of the European capitals of culture in 2007 and the city is situated in an historically important and very interesting region. Hence, ULBS has an excellent starting position for international activities. The University is very active with respect to several aspects of internationalisation. But its strategy for internationalisation seems to be very general and not focused very much on the core strengths cultural and technical sciences of ULBS.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility, research collaborations, double degree curricula, etc.).
- Benchmark with similar institutions and compare key parameters (curricula, research, mobility numbers, etc.)

- Strengthen internationalisation at home by offering courses given in English language at all faculties.
- Raise support for incoming students by offering free language courses and assisting them with accommodation.

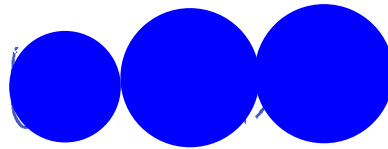
9. Final Remarks

ULBS is a well-established and recognized university. Its importance for the region of Sibiu and beyond is evident. The leaders of ULBS are highly committed to the institution and supported by a very motivated academic and administrative staff, engaged students and very supportive stakeholders. If ULBS proceeds its successful way of

- streamlining its organisational structure and decision processes,
- reducing internal bureaucracy,
- consolidating its study offer and
- increasing decentralization following the principle of subsidiarity

it has an excellent basis to meet the actual and future challenges and opportunities of higher education.

My remarks and recommendations should assist ULBS to proceed a successful way into the future.



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