

External Evaluator's Report
to the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
(ARACIS)
about the Institution Organizing Doctoral Study Programmes
(IOSUD)
Romanian Academy
2021

INTRODUCTION

I was appointed as an International Expert for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and was invited to join the evaluation team for the evaluation (IOSUD) of the School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy (SCOSAAR). It was the third time that participated in an assessment at IOSUD level, but it was quite special and a great honour as I evaluated SCOSAAR. The audit was planned to take place from 25 October to 5 November, but it was extended until 19 November. The evaluation process was conducted online. The evaluation team had a preliminary meeting (Zoom) Friday 22 October in the afternoon to discuss the main methodological aspects related to the institutional evaluation and establish the details of the visit.

A huge evaluation team (57 members) took part in the evaluation process as SCOSAAR has 16 doctoral programmes carried out in five fundamental fields. SCOSAAR is an important actor to train highly qualified specialists for academic scientific research, for university education and other professionals for different areas.

The evaluation process began on Monday 25 October at 5 p.m. at Zoom platform with the introductory statements of Prof. univ. dr. ing. Neculai-Eugen Seghediu (mission director) and prof. univ. dr. Răzvan-Liviu Nistor (coordinator of the IOSUD committee). We also discussed the preparation and harmonization of evaluation steps, in hybrid mode, of doctoral study domains and IOSUD.

At 6 p.m. we had a meeting with representatives of the Academy and of the Council for Academic Doctoral Studies (CSUD). Acad. Bogdan C. Simionescu (Vice-President of Romanian Academy) welcomed the evaluation team and gave a general overview about the operation of the Romanian Academy and SCOSAAR. (At this time and also 26 October the translation was not simultaneous and also sometime technical problems occurred, so it was very difficult to follow the content of the meetings. Fortunately, we received an English summary of every meeting which did not have an appropriate English interpretation.)

The other meetings went smoothly according to the schedule of the evaluation visit.

Although I have participated in the evaluation of a few doctoral schools at universities, the features of the PhD programmes, the structural background and organizational culture are seem a bit different to me at the Romanian Academy.

METHOD

In my role as an International Expert Evaluator, I was responsible for establishing an overview of IOUSUD.

Therefore

- I previously studied the Self-evaluation Report of the IOSUD and its' Annexes;
- I also studied the websites of SCOSAAR, which availability in English were very limited;
- I attended most of the common sessions according to the timetable of the institutional evaluation visit (between 22 October and 19 November) as an observer (simultaneous translation was available);
- I addressed written questions to the stakeholders, which I could not discover in the documents in advance or could not follow during the online meetings.

My findings and comments are based on the studied documents, the information I have gained from the websites of SCOSAAR and I have heard during the meetings. Some quality indicators are used according to Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to carry out the diagnosis.

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The administrative, managerial institutional structures and the financial resources

The Romanian Academy is a national institution of public interest, a research institution in most important areas of sciences. The Romanian Academy may establish Doctoral School in compliance with the provisions of the National Education Law and has to operate according to the legal provisions that govern the higher education system in Romania. SCOSAAR organizes doctoral studies based on its regulations, which are approved by the Presidium and General Assembly of the Romanian Academy. The regulations at the level of IOSUD and of the Doctoral School can be found on the SCOSAAR website only in Romanian.

It is clear from regulations (Regulamentul de organizare a studiilor universitare de doctorat în cadrul Școlii de Studii Avansate a Academiei Române - <https://acad.ro/scosaar/doc2013/doc2013-0910Regulament.pdf>) that the Scientific Council has maximum 15 members out of which three are students' representatives, but no description can be found about the methodology of their election. The other internal regulations are exist and the implementation seems to be efficient.

Comment: The PhD students are not very much involved in decision-making, as the participation and election to the different bodies (commissions, committees) of SCOSAAR are not clear. I could not find any proof even about existence of the students' election methodology.

In SCOSAAR the PhD programmes are carried out within five fundamental domain of science which means 16 doctoral study fields all together. Synergies can be found among the different doctoral programmes. Scientific research is continuously monitored and evaluated annually.

It seems that the management structures of SCOSAAR bit different in the comparison of those doctoral schools, which are operating at universities. The cause might be that the Romanian Academy is under the force of double regulations (the

National Education Law and Law no. 752/2001 regarding the organization and functioning of the Romanian Academy).

Comment: Legislative intervention might be needed in the future.

The relations between the doctoral student and SCOSAAR established by the Contract for doctoral studies. This document defines in details not only the rights and obligations of each of the parties but the interruption and the extension of PhD studies and so on.

The records of doctoral students are decentralized. It is registered through a simple database at the levels of the institutes.

An IT program for comparing text documents is used in SCOSAAR (anti-plagiarism software - sistemantiplagiat.ro). It is an adequate platform for checking the similitude percentage for the doctoral thesis.

Research infrastructure

It is very difficult to gauge that the research infrastructure of the Doctoral School fulfil all the requirements (research and development units, laboratories, libraries etc.) without being present myself on site. According to the Self-evaluation Report and its annexes; the experiences of my colleagues, who took part in the site visit, I was convinced that the Romanian Academy has very good research facilities and a very performant infrastructure. The modern research facilities supports the development of PhD students scientific activities. All doctoral students benefiting from the libraries existing at each institute as well as from the Romanian Academy Library.

The Romanian Academy Library has over 16 million units, out of which 3.6 million are monographs and 5.3 million are serial publications. It also has the richest collection of manuscripts in the country. Doctoral students have access to international databases, specialized journals etc.

The institutes of the Romanian Academy cooperate with prestigious domestic and foreign universities. Many publications were completed from cooperation of international partnership.

Quality of Human Resource

The quality of human resources and the scientific potential in SCOSAAR is on top level. According to the self-evaluation report, SCOSAAR has 177 doctoral supervisors.

The doctoral supervisors' number is in ratio with the number of students. The number of supervisors who simultaneously coordinate more than 8 doctoral students, but not more than 12, in the period of PhD studies are 10 out of the 177 (5.65%).

152/177 (85.88%) of the doctoral supervisors implied in didactic and research activities in the advanced university studies training programmes or in the individual scientific research programmes are tenured of IOSUD Romanian Academy, employed with individual contract for an indefinite period.

150 doctoral supervisors (84.75%) from SCOSAAR meet and even exceed the minimum standards established by the Specialized commissions of CNATDCU.

Comment: The age structure of the PhD supervisors have to be balanced in a few doctoral domains.

EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

The number, quality and diversity of candidates enrolled for the admission contest

The admission requirements and procedures are fairly well documented. The admission criteria and selection procedures are in line with the European standards. Besides the recognition of prior studies results, other scholarly activity such as research and publication records are taken into consideration in the selection process, so the admission to the doctoral study programme in SCOSAAR is based on primarily the candidates' previous academic performance. The admission contest

consists a written test and an interview in front of a commission with three members. The evaluation of the candidates is done orally. Each member of the commission asks questions of a general or specific nature, important for the research topic addressed.

67 PhD students dropped out of doctoral studies for personal reasons between 2016-2020, which is not high, although the distribution is very hectic year by year. Most of the dropouts due to the students' subjective reasons influenced by external factors, not because of dissatisfaction with the doctoral programme. SCOSAAR has a policy that stimulates registering of the PhD students coming from disadvantaged social milieus by assigning special places at admission and/or giving social scholarships as well as by organizing supporting programmes in order to prevent university dropout.

The content of doctoral programmes

The training programme based on doctoral studies is reflected in the education plans and in the PhD supervisors' research themes. The training of doctoral students depend on the specifics of the doctoral fields. At least one course is intended for the in-depth study of research methodology and / or statistical data processing. The curricula for all doctoral fields include the compulsory discipline Ethics and Academic Integrity. Doctoral student's individual programme consists of didactic and scientific activities (courses, seminars, laboratories, etc.). Every doctoral supervisor in SCOSAAR has the required competence for the didactic disciplines in the PhD students' educational plan.

The doctoral supervisor(s) coordinates each PhD student's activity. Also a guidance commission, made up of three scientific researchers/teaching staff having the title of doctor from the institutes of the Romanian Academy or from other research institutions or universities, supports the doctoral student in his/her scientific activities.

The level of the curriculum design, teaching and assessment and the academic and professional standards are, in general, in line with the standards expected of a qualification at EQF Level 8. I believe that, in general, the learning outcomes of the Doctoral Programmes are consistent.

Comment: I appreciate those efforts, which aims to teach more disciplines in English for internationalization of SCOSAAR.

The results of doctoral studies and procedures for their evaluation

According to the Romanian Academy regulations PhD studies take place full time, with/without scholarship. During the evaluation period, 327 doctoral theses were defended within SCOSAAR in 16 fields in which doctoral study programmes were carried out.

The evaluation of PhD students in each study domain of SCOSAAR has clear criteria and mechanism, which are included and proved in the self-assessment report and its annexes. During the special pandemic conditions, modifications were approved regarding the procedures of taking examinations, elaborating reviews and doctoral theses online. SCOSAAR ensured for each PhD student financial resources for the materials needed for research, for publications, participation in conferences etc.

PhD students are members of research teams. They are involved in the development and implementation of research and development projects. These are materialised in patents, presentations at national and international conferences, publishing research results in national and international publications.

Quality of doctoral theses

There were only one invalidated theses in the evaluated period. Over 90% of the doctoral theses defended in public at the Romanian Academy were appreciated with the qualifications Excellent and Very good, which were also confirmed by the Specialized Commissions of CNATDCU.

Comment: The PhD theses completed in the doctoral programmes of SCOSAAR meet high quality standards.

QUALITY MANAGEMENT

Existence and periodic implementation of the internal quality assurance system

SCOSAAR pays a special attention to quality assurance, although some room for improvement should be done in the procedures and the administration which doctoral studies are organized. Generally the internal quality management system is well described and regulated detailed.

It seems that the election and the participation of students' representatives for positions in the different bodies are problematic.

At the level of each institute doctoral students, through mostly research grants, are supported in participating in international conferences and publishing articles in journals with significant impact factor.

The satisfaction with the doctoral programme of doctoral students is constantly monitored. The reported deficiencies are remedied. The doctoral supervisors and guidance committees stimulate scientific performance through tutoring work.

Transparency of information and accessibility of learning resources

SCOSAAR and the 32 institutes where activities are carried out with doctoral students in the 16 fields publish on their web-sites the necessary information. Only a few institute have available information in English on their homepages.

The doctoral students have access to academic relevant national/international databases and scientific publications.

Academic misconduct and plagiarism are serious breaches of academic standards. The verification of the originality of the scientific papers, which include doctoral theses is available in SCOSAAR, as an internet-based plagiarism detection service is available for doctoral students, based on a request approved by the doctoral

supervisor (<https://sistemantiplagiat.ro/>). Each PhD student also has access to well-equipped scientific research laboratories, based on a request made by the doctoral student, approved by the doctoral supervisor and the person in charge of the equipment. Other facilities (e.g. free access to the libraries of the institutes and to the Romanian Academy Library, regarding online resources, services offered, useful information etc.) are also available for PhD students depending on the programme within the doctoral school.

Internationalization

SCOSAAR makes sustained efforts to increase the degree of internationalization of doctoral studies. SCOSAAR has also developed and implemented policies and action plans aimed at increasing the number of doctoral students participating in training courses abroad. The Romanian Academy has mobility agreements with research institutes abroad, but short mobility, e.g. attending international scientific conferences, is a more popular form among students in SCOSAAR. 360 internationally recognized specialists were invited who presented courses/lectures for doctoral students.

A few examples can be found for international co-tutelage for PhD students, but furthermore international joint supervisions are needed. Out of the 327 defended doctoral theses, 17 (5.20%) were written in English and 14 (4.28%) were presented in during the evaluation period. International experts are involved in commissions for defence of doctoral theses in a few study domains (Biology, Chemistry, Computers and Information Technology, Mathematics).

Comment: Involving more foreign professors as co-supervisors and increasing the number of doctoral students' participation in longer mobility is encouraged. It might be beneficial for all stakeholders.

Visible activities for internationalization can be experienced at SCOSAAR in accordance with its internationalization strategy, but further efforts are needed.

System for assurance of ethical and academic integrity

SCOSAAR has procedures for plagiarism and collusion. The supervisor has to do everything to prevent plagiarism, but it is not a supervisor's primary responsibility to ensure that thesis does not contain plagiarised elements. The student should ensure that all copyright requirements avoiding plagiarism are met. It is very much welcomed that "Ethics and Academic Integrity" course was introduced generally in every programme at doctoral level in the academic year of 2018/2019.

SCOSAAR has also put in place and implements mechanisms and measures to ensure equal opportunities and protection against intolerance and discrimination of any kind.

Allegations or suspected cases of academic misconduct or plagiarism are investigated and managed by the Ethics Commission. In their annual reports, information is given on the stage of solving each case in which there was a notification or self-notification relevant for doctoral studies on violations of ethical rules and issues. There were no cases of withdrawal of the doctor's degree, as a result of the final decisions of CNATDCU following the plagiarism notifications.

I was informed that the measures to prevent academic fraud in doctoral studies would be implemented in the future.

The database with the defended doctoral theses are not available at the given website (<https://acad.ro/scosaar/departments.html>).

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strenghts

- Strong academic background;
- High quality human resources;
- Well equipped infrastructure for the doctoral students;
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Weaknesses

- Lack of appropriate representation and election methodology of doctoral students;
- Minor deficiencies in the application of procedures and implementation of administration;
- Little information available in English or other foreign languages at SCOSAAR's websites.

Opportunities

- Increasing long-term mobility among doctoral students.;
- Increasing the number of international students;
- More use of eLearning environment and culture.

Threats

- Decreasing number of potential candidates for doctoral study programmes;
- The age structure of the PhD supervisors. The supervisors age-tree is getting older in a few doctoral domains;
- Prolonged pandemic situation by COVID-19.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGMENTS AWARDED AND OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

No.	Type of indicator (PI, PI *, CPI)	Performance indicator	Judgment	Recommendations
1.	PI	A.1.1.1.	partially fulfilled	Methodology for conducting elections for the students' representatives is missing.
2.	PI	A.1.1.2.	fulfilled	
3.	PI *	A.1.1.3.	fulfilled	
4.	PI	A.1.2.1.	fulfilled	
5.	CPI	A.1.2.2.	fulfilled	
6.	PI	A.2.1.1.	fulfilled	
7.	PI	A.2.1.2.	fulfilled	

No.	Type of indicator (PI, PI *, CPI)	Performance indicator	Judgment	Recommendations
8.	PI	A.2.1.3.	fulfilled	
9.	PI *	A.3.1.1.	fulfilled	
10.	CPI	A.3.1.2.	fulfilled	
11.	PI *	B.1.1.1.	fulfilled	
12.	PI	B.1.1.2.	fulfilled	
13.	PI	B.2.1.1.	fulfilled	
14.	PI	B.2.1.2.	fulfilled	
15.	PI	B.2.1.3.	fulfilled	
16.	PI	B.3.1.1.	fulfilled	
17.	CPI	B.4.1.1.	fulfilled	
18.	PI	C.1.1.1.	fulfilled	
19.	PI	C.1.1.2.	partially fulfilled	The election and the participation of students' representatives for positions in the different bodies are problematic.
20.	PI	C.1.1.3.	partially fulfilled	The election and the participation of students' representatives for positions in the different bodies are problematic.
21.	PI *	C.1.1.4.	fulfilled	
22.	CPI	C.2.1.1.	fulfilled	
23.	CPI	C.2.2.1.	fulfilled	
24.	PI	C.2.2.2.	fulfilled	
25.	PI	C.2.2.3.	fulfilled	
26.	PI *	C.3.1.1.	fulfilled	
27.	PI	C.3.1.2.	fulfilled	
28.	PI *	C.3.1.3.	not fulfilled	Out of the 327 defended doctoral theses, 17 (5.20%) were written in English and 14 (4.28%) were presented in during the evaluation period.
29.	PI	C.3.1.4.	partially fulfilled	International experts are involved in commissions for defence of doctoral

No.	Type of indicator (PI, PI *, CPI)	Performance indicator	Judgment	Recommendations
				theses only in a few study domains.
30.	PI	C.4.1.1.	fulfilled	
31.	PI	C.4.1.2.	fulfilled	
32.	PI	C.4.1.3.	fulfilled	
33.	CPI	C.4.1.4.	fulfilled	
34.	PI	C.4.1.5.	not fulfilled	The measures to prevent academic fraud in doctoral studies will be implemented in the future.
35.	PI *	C.4.1.6.	fulfilled	
36.	PI	C.4.1.7.	lack of sufficient information	The database with the defended doctoral theses are not available at the given website.

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to emphasize that SCOSAAR represents a high quality within the Romanian Academy and the activity reach the requirement of the European standards of education and scientific research. Although some room for improvement can be found, what I have mentioned in my report. The doctoral students' motivation, the whole community (academics, researches and administrators) commitments and professionalism are the basis of the success of SCOSAAR.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to leadership of Romanian Academy and every member of the evaluation team for the support during the evaluation mission. Also thanks to ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this online evaluation process.

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