

# Agora University of Oradea (AUO) - External Institutional Evaluation

## Report

May 2023



### Introduction

As stated in the Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision.

Higher education aims to fulfil multiple purposes, including preparing students for active citizenship, for their future careers (e.g. contributing to their employability), supporting their personal development, creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation. Therefore, stakeholders, who may prioritize different purposes, can view quality in higher education differently and quality assurance needs to take into account these different perspectives. Quality assurance should ensure a learning environment in which the content of the study programs, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose.

A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement). Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related. They can support the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management.

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for the institutional evaluation of Agora University of Oradea (AUO). Prior to the site visit, I had studied the English version of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of the AUO and some other documents. During the visit, which was carried out on-site from 10th to 12th of May 2023, I had a very good opportunity to build upon the information I had received about the AUO and its operation.

The site visit started with a preliminary meeting of experts, who are the members of the evaluation team. At this meeting, a preparation and harmonization of evaluation stages was discussed. Then, there was a meeting with the leading representatives of the AUO. During the whole period of evaluation, I had a chance to participate in several plenary/group meetings with representatives of the AUO teaching staff, students, alumni and also the employers of graduates of the AUO. Besides, a series of individual meetings, as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions within the AUO and beyond followed during the site visit.

During the site visit, I received additional documents related to some aspects of the operation upon my request, which helped me to complete the image. Thanks to this, I had a chance to study materials related to leadership, management and governance, budgeting, study provision, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and many other aspects of the operation of the AUO for the purpose of its evaluation. Since the visit was organized on-site, I also had a very good possibility to see the main premises of the AUO.

I would like to express my gratitude to Ms. Claudia Milea, an ARACIS officer, for his very helpful support throughout the evaluation process. I also benefited from a highly collegial approach of the whole group of evaluators, the head of the mission and Prof. Vasilica Stan, the coordinator of the expert evaluators' team.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned above, I herewith submit my report on the AUO's institutional performance as I have perceived it. I am aware that this is a limited view by an external evaluator, and a much deeper insight would be needed to really catch the essence of some of the issues evaluated. My evaluation, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration, should be understood as a collegial attempt to provide the AUO and ARACIS with opinions with the aim to contribute to possible improvements at the AUO and the quality assurance of the higher education in Romania.

### **Institution Internal Self-Evaluation Report (SER)**

The Evaluated Institution has taken the evaluation process very seriously and carefully prepared a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). This document was available as 109 pages pdf document in the ARACIS cloud, and I was able to access it easily, on-time and as often as necessary. To support information included in the SER, the annexes were addressed as links to documents publicly available online in digital format. These documents were later completed with other additional documents, upon request from the evaluation panel. All these documents were uploaded to the ARACIS cloud or sent directly by e-mail to the evaluation panel.

### **Mission statement**

Agora University of Oradea is a private university, institutionally accredited, in accordance with the legislation on the accreditation of higher education institutions, by Law no. 59/2012.

Slogan: ACCESS TO SUCCESS!

The mission statement of AUO relates to all the three main pillars which each higher education institution should have – teaching, research/development, and public reach (the third role). In particular, the AUO declares the mission “ to contribute to the development of the university activity in the western part of Romania, in maintaining and transmitting the Romanian science and culture, in creating new scientific knowledge in the fields that are part of the proposed objectives.” (SER, p. 18).

To carry out its mission, the university has set itself the following strategic objectives:

- recognition of the quality of educational services carried out at AUO in Europe and the world;
- optimization of the research activity;
- creating an academic "Agora" culture.

It may be concluded, the mission of the AUO appears to have a potential to serve as a basis for strategic planning at the AUO.

The Strategic Plan of the AUO for the period 2021-2025 relates to all the main areas/aspects of the institution's operation and it is elaborated in the structure Objectives – Directions of actions and Specific measures – Performance indicators. There is a clear interconnection among the mission, the vision and the strategy of the AUO.

### **Academic freedom and academic integrity**

AUO aims to abandon the old approaches within an integrated educational process, this leading to the reduction of administrative costs, the members of the academic community benefit from more freedom to find, most of the time together with the students, creative solutions materialized in original bachelor's and dissertation papers.

The AUO operates in the conditions of academic autonomy, academic freedom, emphasising free and equal access and public responsibility and accountability. The respect to academic freedom concerns the staff, as well as students.

The Ethics Commission is the main body dealing with this agenda, its reports are published annually. The Ethics Commission seems to be functioning well and it has sufficient support from the AUO.

Overall, the bodies of the AUO seem to be in compliance with legislation and they provide the faculties with the respective academic freedom.

### **Organisation and management**

The organizational structures and subdivisions that ensure the AUO management system, as well as the relationships of hierarchical subordination that are established between them are specified in the University's Organizational Chart. The AUO has a clear distribution of duties and a delineation of the responsibilities of its administrative staff and governing bodies.

The AUO has a number of regulatory documents, which determine organisation and management processes in the institution. The University Charter is the key document in this respect. Both the University Charter and the regulations are periodically reviewed by the representative bodies of the University, in accordance with the legislation on higher education at national and European level.

The structure of the university includes two faculties: the Faculty of Legal and Administrative Sciences (FLAS), with the Department of Legal and Administrative Sciences (DLAS) and the Faculty of Economic Sciences (FES), with the Department of Economic Sciences (DES).

The principles of the organization of the AUO and its functioning are described in the SER and they provide a good basis for the main areas of institutional operation. The electoral regulations stipulate a transparent procedure for electing the leaders of the institution. The management system uses Internet, as well as Intranet information and communication systems.

Students are represented in consultative, decision-making and executive structures within the AUO.

### ***Recommendation:***

- *Consider the possibility of having the senate without academics who at the same time exercise executive functions at the AUO.*
- *Equality of representation (e.g. gender, discipline, faculty) should be considered in all university bodies and functions.*
- *Review the titles of the institution and its faculties to reflect research-oriented strategic direction and current study programmes.*

### **Academic programmes and student management**

The AUO has been realising a small number of study programmes at different levels within a number of study domains. AUO organizes bachelor's and master's degree programs at the Faculty of Legal and Administrative Sciences and Faculty of Economics.

The information about the programmes is published. The admission procedures seem to be in accordance with the legislation.

The academic programmes are in correspondence with the AUO's mission statement, as well as with international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum may be viewed as appropriate for the awarded academic degrees, there is a combination of professional, as well as transversal knowledge and skills presented in the programmes. The programmes seem to be well thought out and they are regularly monitored, evaluated and updated.

The rules related to the assessment of student results throughout all study phases are clear and publicly accessible too.

The nomenclature of the subjects of study in the educational plan, the number of hours by categories of teaching activities, as well as their classification in one category or another of disciplines are established according to the norms in force. For the economic domain, AUO participates in collegial consultations, organized at national level, within the Association of Faculties of Economics in Romania (AFER), AUO being one of its founding members.

Students' study paths have a certain degree of flexibility.

Student support services seem to be provided sufficiently in most cases. Staff contact hours, tutors for each study group/year of study, and mentors are significant measures regularly implemented at the AUO.

During the site visit interviews, students mostly voiced a positive view of the support they had been given by the university.

The AUO pays attention to the graduates and their employability in the labour market. AUO aims to abandon the old approaches within an integrated educational process, this leading to the reduction of administrative costs, the members of the academic community benefit from more freedom to find, most of the time together with the students, creative solutions materialized in original bachelor's and dissertation papers.

During the meetings, employer representatives were positive about the AUO graduates. Some of them highlighted, however, the need to re-consider some aspects of the AUO operation – for instance, the need for a clearer framework for the cooperation between employers and the AUO; the need for more flexible curricula.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- *Make sure student activities of the associations are sufficiently funded by the UOA and students have sufficient information about available funding.*
- *Make sure employers have significant role in developing the study programmes, as well as other activities at the UAO.*
- *To continue to consult external stakeholders in order to adapt its curricula in agreement to new labor market requirements.*
- *To consider authorization/accreditation of new study programs taught in international languages.*
- *Further promote internship and exchange opportunities to its students.*

#### **Internationalisation and research activity**

The international dimension in teaching, research and the public reach at the AUO seems to be on a good level.

In 2022 November AUO joined the Coalition for Advanced Research Evaluation (COAR) as a founding member. Although AUO is a relatively small institution, through inter-university institutional ties nationally and internationally it has managed to attract funds for research, through partnership programs and joint research projects with institutions in Romania and in China, India, USA, Norway.

The objectives of the research activity according to the mission assumed in the University Charter.

Within the research centres there are topics that are part of the structure of some grants, or excellent research projects.

AUO hosted the Job Exchange organized by AJOFM Bihor, a scholarship for graduates, an event where it was found the requirement of improvement and identification on the labour market of vacancies in many fields of activity.

Members of the research teams are materially supported to participate in scientific events (conferences, symposiums, workshops, or research-specific product fairs). AUO acts to reward the work of research teams in accordance with the revenues achieved through research contracts.

The research centres have journals in which the results of their own research are published.

The University promotes and enforces clear policies on academic integrity and copyright protection. Also, the university has procedures to prevent and identify plagiarism, in order to avoid violations of the norms of ethics and integrity by members of the academic community.

For the dissemination of the research results, AUO has three specialized journals: *Agora International Journal of Economical Sciences*, *Agora International Journal of Juridical Sciences*, *International Journal of Computers, Communication and Control*, *Agora International Journal of Administration Sciences* and *Agora International Journal of Masters Studies*.

Within the AUO there are five research and development centres (Research and Development Agora Ltd, LAAR Ltd, Conexis, CEPCCCT), with several directions.

Congratulation to the *International Journal of Computers Communications & Control (IJCCC)*, indexed ISI Web of Science (IF: 2,635; Q3).

The AUO has developed numerous international relationships. The AUO declares it collaborates with 18 universities in frame of the Erasmus programme according to the Erasmus+ Charter.

The AUO organizes several international conferences schools which are open to international audiences.

The level of internationalisation of research at the AUO is also good in a number of cases.

The International Office is in charge of most of the internationalisation agenda and this seems to be working well.

Overall, the AUO seems to be well internationally networked and anchored and this contributes to the international profile of its main activities.

### **Recommendations:**

- *Benchmark with similar institutions and compare key parameters (curricula, research, mobility numbers, etc.).*
- *Contract teachers from other universities to give online courses at AUO.*
- *In order to increase international visibility and to attract also foreign students, any new postgraduate programmes should be offered in English language.*
- *Continue to seek partnerships with similar institutions within the same country or abroad to provide a framework for student and staff mobility.*
- *Continue efforts to direct the results of scientific research towards publications and other results with national and international relevance.*
- *Actively promote all forms of Internationalisation opportunities for staff and students: ERASMUS, virtual international weeks, participation in international student fairs, and the resourcing of international guest lecturers.*

### **Staff**

The AUO has a qualified staff to provide the current portfolio of educational programmes as well other relevant activities.

Teaching and research staff at the university are recruited on a competitive basis. AUO offers equal opportunities, without gender discrimination or based on other criteria, to candidates for teaching positions. Leadership at AUO is highly-motivated and there have been significant improvements over the last years.

According to the SER it results from Annex 18 - The evolution of the teaching staff in AUO, for the academic year 2022/2023, there are 33 titular teachers out of which 2 professors, 8 readers, 19 lecturers and 4 assistants, of which 30.30% are professors and readers.

AUO ensures coverage with adequate teaching staff both numerically and in preparation of the activities provided in the subjects of the curriculum for at least one bachelor's degree cycle.

During the interviews, it appeared there are some staff development activities related mainly to teaching skills development, including online teaching.

Regular evaluations are an integral part of working with the staff. This includes a variety of evaluation methods, and they might have a potential to serve as a basis for possible improvements.

During the interviews, some representatives of the younger generation of academic staff expressed their well-balance workload between teaching and research.

The teachers carry out permanence hours and hours of consultations in which they are available to the students for guiding them during the academic year both for the activities arising from the teaching-learning process and for the activities related to the individual training program.

Students and alumni were positive about the academic staff, as well as about the administration support.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- *Especially, at small institutions it is essential to save human resources and to avoid any overlapping of responsibilities.*
- *Make sure the workload of each academic staff category is properly balanced, as for the teaching, research and the public reach.*
- *To promote the continuous professional training of teaching staff to acquire new skills, methods and techniques that can further improve their teaching activity.*
- *Continue to identify and use innovative techniques for effective teaching/learning, including the use of new technologies and the organization of training sessions for academic staff and try to maximize participation to these type of training sessions.*

#### **Finance and infrastructure/Premises and equipment**

The financial activity of the AUO is organized on the basis of non-profit and self-financing. The university's budget is made from tuition fees, research contracts, grants, organizing conferences, symposiums, sales of publications and books produced by the University Publishing House, other gains generated by the activity of AUO under the law.

The annual budget is approved by the Board of Trustees and the University Senate and is rigorously respected. Financial issues are coordinated by the Financial-Accounting Department. In addition to ensuring the current needs, the university has financial reserves, diversified sources of financing and accuracy in planning and defining investment and financial management policies.

AUO has its own fee system. The annual tuition fees are relatively low compared to the fees charged by other public and private universities in Romania - between 500 euros (in the Management and Accounting and Management Information Systems specialization for the

2020-2023 promotion) and 750 euros (in the Law specialization for the 2022-2026 promotion) for the bachelor's programs, and 650 euros for the master's programs.

The AUO provides some scholarship opportunities to the students. It has the responsibility for awarding scholarships and other forms of material support for students. The AUO Senate decided that students should be able to benefit from three categories of scholarships: the Agora scholarship, the merit scholarship, the social scholarship. In order to encourage the spirit of competitiveness, the

The AUO has recovery programs for students with learning difficulties (regular meetings with the psychologist).

Scholarships are provided from allocations from the the institution's own resources. The financing of university studies is ensured through tuition fees approved annually by the Agora University Senate, through research contracts, projects with European funding as well as from other sources made available by the Agora Foundation.

Students are also to some extent supported to participate in research programmes, scientific events, student competitions, publication activities.

Financial management seems to be in line with the financial policy of the AUO. Overall, the financial-accounting activity of the AUO seems to comply with the legislation and it is periodically a subject of internal, as well as external financial audits.

As for the infrastructure, the AUO has its own spaces for teaching, research and the public reach.

There are also dining areas, a library with a solid supply of relevant databases, some facilities for sports, and more. Within AUO operates the "Agora Sport Club University" (AUSC), an association that has in its composition the sections of chess, martial arts, and badminton. AUSC. The AUO has IT support for its main processes.

***Recommendation:***

- *To maintain subscription to software packages as well as continuously identify possible needs of both teaching/research staff and students in order to expand subscription and/or acquire more software packages.*
- *Continue to equip all research and teaching laboratories with equipment and resources so they can meet the requirements, at least at a minimum level, of dealing with current scientific topics in the fields assumed by the institution.*
- *To expand high-speed Wi-Fi coverage to as many as possible buildings and facilities.*

**Quality management**

The quality assurance (QA) of the main processes is paid sufficient attention to at the AUO.

AUO develops and perfects its own system of quality assurance of educational and scientific research services.

Overall, the structure and processes of quality assurance are developed on a solid base. Quality assurance is one of the eight areas that are explicitly elaborated on in the strategic plan of the institution (2020-2024).

In the structure of the university were established the "Evaluation and Quality Assurance Commission" at university level and the "Quality Assurance Department" at the faculty level, which operates on the basis of the strategy and regulation elaborated and approved by the university senate.

It is mainly focused on QA policies, strategies and procedures, methodologies of evaluation of programmes, student evaluation, ensuring the quality of the teaching staff performance, evaluation of the learning process and so on.

There are a number of evaluation activities at the AUO and they are synergic with quality assurance and enhancement efforts. Among them, self-evaluation and peer evaluation seem to function well.

Students of all programmes are required to provide feedback as for the teaching activity and its main features. It is not clear how students are informed about what is happening with their feedback. Neither is it clear whether and how it is ensured that the teaching staff whose work is evaluated by the students have a chance to respond to student feedback, explain the reasons of their work/approach etc.

***Recommendations:***

*Make sure students are informed about what is happening with the feedback they provided on teaching activity.*

*Further strengthen certain internal quality arrangements (e.g. benchmarking with comparable institutions).*

- *Make sure teaching staff whose activity is evaluated by the students have a chance to respond to students on their feedback.*

*Make sure performance of the academic staff leads to increased quality of research work overall at the AUO.*

*Continue to publish the AUO annual reports on the university website.*

*A greater awareness of ESG and a QA methodology closer to the ESG would be useful in terms of European cooperation and important in developing further international partnerships.*

**Final recommendation**

AUO is a small but well-established university with strong leadership, highly motivated staff, committed students and very favourable support. AUO upholds a good quality of education but there is scope to evolve in a number of aspects concerning the Bologna principles and current challenges of higher education.

I have confidence that AUO will continue to contribute to the Romanian society through education, research and its great social engagement

My remarks and recommendations should assist AUO to proceed its successful way into the future.

**I recommend providing the Agora University of Oradea with „trust” institutional accreditation.**

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