

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education  
ARACIS

External Evaluator's Report

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE AND FILM  
"I.L. CARAGIALE" - UNATC

Bucharest

23-26.11.2022

A) Introduction

UNATC is the oldest and largest performing arts higher education institution in Romania. Consists of two Faculties:

- Faculty of Theatre, and
- Faculty of Film,

the institution operates from two buildings located in the Bucharest city center. UNATC academic offer consists of 13<sup>1</sup> bachelor and 22 master programs, doctoral studies, and postgraduate training programs.

The University management team is led by Rector and supported by three Vice-Rectors (in charge of Research, development & innovation, International relations and image, and Academic management & student affairs). Support services are managed by the General Administrative Director. Academic structures at the faculty level are led by Deans and supported by Vice-deans and Heads of departments. The supreme governing body is the Senate, which consists of 75% of faculty delegates and 25% of student representatives.

UNATC is without any doubt an institution of significant cultural importance at the national level. The overall assessment of UNATC is positive, especially having in mind obvious improvements that have been implemented since the last evaluation. The recent building reconstruction is a great example of how to turn challenges into opportunities. With highly skilled teaching staff, with dual background (Ph.D. & professional practice, recognized artists) UNATC is an institution that provides well-structured educational services to feed a significant portion of the national performing and cinematographic art industry sector. These services are provided to highly motivated students that pass through a very competitive process to get admitted. Some

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<sup>1</sup> There is inconsistency between tables 1 & 13 (p.5-7, 43-45) addressing the number of study programs

of the research projects UNATC undertakes are at a very advanced, multidisciplinary level.

However, during the meetings with key internal and external stakeholders, evaluators have identified certain issues and gaps that, if properly addressed, could additionally improve the overall impression.

## **B) General Statements**

The Internal Evaluation report is well prepared and provides the expected extent of information regarding the institution. However, as the ARACIS standards do not stipulate the report structure, some areas are not sufficiently covered (e.g. curriculum) to provide a full picture of the institution.

The structure of the Internal Evaluation Report (IER) includes four key chapters: Overview, Institutional Capacity, and Educational Effectiveness & Quality Assurance. Additional 87 Annexes have been provided as evidence quoted within the report.

The IER and additionally submitted documents show the trend of a slight increase in the new students enrolled in Master's programs, while there is a slight decrease in enrollments into Bachelor & Doctoral programs. Graduation rates at some programs show a certain lack of motivation for students to finalize obligations at their study program (capstone exam). The attrition rate is generally higher at Master level programs and the Academy of Film. Exploring further during the meetings with UNATC, the opportunity to start a professional career without a final certificate has been identified as the main reason for such attrition.

The university website is recently re-designed and provide essential information about the institution, academic offer, research, and other external activities. However, some information is not regularly updated (e.g. new study programs) or incorporated (e.g. campus interactive map). Moreover, the website is available in Romanian only.

ARACIS and the host institution have provided the evaluation team to meet university management, representatives of students, graduates, and employers, teaching and administrative staff members, as well as quality and ethics committee teams. During the meetings, more insights from various perspectives have provided better insight into the institution and processes within. Some of the statements provided during meetings have indicated that there may be certain inconsistencies and insufficient coordination and collaboration between two Faculties, which results in certain discrepancies in student satisfaction depending on which school they attend.

### ***Comments/Recommendations:***

***B.1. (for ARACIS) Develop more robust accreditation standards for the institutional evaluation to help in all phases of the evaluation process (plan / do / check / act).***

***B.2. Explore ways to additionally motivate students to finalize their studies; having in***

*mind the dynamics of change in higher education, they may face some restrictions and obstacles if they decide to graduate later in their lives (e.g. in order to proceed to the higher level of studies).*

*B.3. Establish stronger functional and curricular relations between the two faculties and provide a similar level of the student experience within both schools.*

*B.4. Provide updated access to university-related information*

### C. Teaching Staff

UNATC pays significant attention to recruiting teaching staff that is highly referent, skilled, and motivated to participate in pedagogic processes. Almost all of the UNATC 131<sup>2</sup> faculty members are Ph.D. holders, and most are also confirmed artists and/or professionals in the areas of their teaching specialization. The passion of the majority of the teaching staff was evident during the visits to classes, especially within the Faculty of Theatre.

The teaching load standards presented during the meetings with management are rational (7 / 9 / 12 hours per week depending on academic rank), however, as per the statements of the faculty representatives, most of them spend much more time in the classrooms and other educational spaces as the art education demands a high level of personalization in teaching/learning process.

The IER shows a significant number of unfilled teaching positions (85). During the meetings, the lack of motivation has been identified (high requirements against low salaries) as a key reason for the current status. However, the overall student-to-faculty ratio (around 1:7) is considered satisfactory for art studies.

A few promising actions have been identified to additionally rectify the academic staffing problem. The first is recent improvements at the doctoral school with additional emphasis on pedagogy, and the second is the multi-university initiative within the Arte University Consortium to explore optimization by implementing joint programs and sharing teaching staff.

While students have stated cases that some faculty are missing classes due to professional commitments, few faculty members have indicated that they use to take students to their gigs and sets as a part of the hands-on component of the teaching process.

Several issues have been identified during the meeting with faculty representatives, such are those related to the suitability of curricula, insufficient coordination along the reporting lines (faculty-department head-dean), and long meetings without sufficient tangible outcomes.

A certain discrepancy has been identified during the meeting with students regarding the faculty attitude and supportiveness between the two faculties. Theatre arts students

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<sup>2</sup> There is inconsistency between tables 9 & 10 (p.21, 23) addressing the staff numbers

have expressed more satisfaction with their faculty than Film students; in addition, they expressed more motivation to participate in faculty evaluation.

#### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*C.1. Explore if the hands-on teaching process component promoted by faculty members may be incorporated into the formal study program.*

*C.2. Lack of a pedagogy module at the faculty of Film (the Faculty of Theatre has a Master's program in pedagogy) has been identified as one of the possible reasons for different perceptions of teachers' dedication. Explore how to balance the implementation of pedagogy (at least at the level of elective) across the programs at both schools.*

#### D. Education programs

The complex structure of the discipline(s) taught at UNATC has initiated a variety of academic offers. With more than 30 academic programs, both faculties are intending to organize and utilize resources to cover a significant number of courses (where most of the courses contain a significant practical component).

The overall program offer has been challenged during several meetings (with graduates, employers, and faculty). All questioned stakeholders have identified extensive narrowness of the specializations and emphasized the importance and gap in the comprehensive understanding of the discipline, industry, and real-world business requirements.

The Acting graduates have complained that the education process focuses significantly on classical theatre, while movie and TV acting remains uncovered. Employers have complained that students, while well-educated within their specialization, lack business skills to support them in the real world. Faculty expressed their awareness that the level of specialization of study programs marginalizes the holistic understanding of the discipline and profession (e.g. film production). Some suggestions have been stated to revise the curriculum, along with a notification that these initiatives didn't result yet.

During the meeting with students, several complaints have been raised regarding the time required to study (as per statements between 50-60 hours per week, which significantly overpasses ECTS 40-hours standard), and insufficient offer of electives.

However, there is evidence that some other initiatives in program improvement are resulting in implementation. The first generation of Acting students has been enrolled in 4-year Bachelor program this fall (the previous duration was 3 years), which promises that some of the identified pitfalls will be rectified.

During the visit, and discussion with stakeholders, the evaluation team has clearly

identified that the two faculties function in silos, and that is an obvious need to establish better functional and curricular relations between the two schools.

While most of the course syllabi are well structured and designed, a certain discrepancy has been identified in some of the course files between competency expectations (especially transferable competencies) and methods of assessment that don't reflect the evaluation of intended outcomes' fulfillment.

#### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*D.1. Analyze ways for revising the program offerings to align with the industry needs. The extent of intervention may span from minor changes, joining a few majors, to radical intervention and redesign of the overall curriculum that shall implement gradual specialization at all education levels.*

*D2. Explore methods to fortify functional ties between the Faculty of Theatre and Faculty of Film in areas of mutual interest (e.g. Acting, Scenography, Pedagogy, Management, etc.) in order to support students' readiness for joining the workforce.*

*D.3. Provide more elective courses to widen the breadth of the educational profiles and enable the personalization of learning paths.*

*D4. Analyze ways to optimize educational delivery time-wise (e.g. joint assessments) in order to meet ECTS criteria.*

*D.5. (for ARACIS) Explore ways to raise the culture of the outcome-based approach in higher education, with emphasis on cascading learning outcomes from program to course level and vice-versa, and aligning outcomes, teaching approach, and assessment methods.*

#### E. Students

The UNATC student body is highly motivated and selected through the very competitive admission process. The overall number of 920 students in a current academic year, is distributed between 548 in Bachelor, 278 at Master, and 94 in Doctoral studies. A bit over 10% of them pay for their education annually amounts between 5000-10000 lei, while the school fees for the rest are covered by the state budget. It is important to note that self-financing students may apply for available merit-based or social scholarships. Students participate in university activities via their representatives in the UNATC Senate (25% of the overall Senate members are students). The process of student representative elections is transparent and well-organized. However, some of the students during the meetings have noted that they are not aware of who their representatives are, and how to address them to raise the issue or submit an initiative.

The alternative channels e.g. via teaching staff do not work equally for students of the Academy of Drama and Academy of Film (who are claiming that facing more obstacles in reach).

UNATC provides its students with career support via the Career Support Center (CCOC). The Center provides guidance and courses in preparing students for the world of work (e.g. how to prepare a CV, or how to apply for a job). The single employee is highly enthusiastic, creative, and engaged, however, the service is understaffed. There is an obvious lack of a professional psychologist (that has been emphasized in the previous evaluation cycle report), which is even more emphasized by having in mind the specificities of the psychological profile of art students. This issue has been reported both by students and staff. The understaffing reflects also on the lack of alumni support. Students coming out of Bucharest are eligible to apply for accommodation in the UNATC dorms. Some additional spaces within the main campus complex are recently reconstructed to be used by students during their spare time and between lectures. However, the capacity is still limited.

#### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*E.1. Analyze ways for enhancing the scope and capacity and of the student support & counseling unit, including alumni support and psychological help. The engagement of the external partner providing psychological help may be considered on a mutual benefit basis.*

*E.2. Having in mind the number of students beginning a professional career as freelancers, it is advisable to explore providing more insights such are legal guidelines or success stories.*

*E.3. Establish a stable channel for student complaints and initiatives via administrative or managerial structure (e.g. via Vice-Rector's office) to ensure that the student voice will be heard and responded to.*

#### F. Research & Scholarship

The research production at UNATC combines with the other ways of artistic scholarship outputs that relate to the fields of the art covered by the institution's study programs. The research activities are organized by the Department for Research, Development & Innovation under the supervision of the responsible Vice-Rector. Several units such are: Library Department, the Publishing and Publications Service, the International Center for Research and Education in Creative Innovative Technologies (CINETic), the Performing Arts and Film Research Center (CeArFi), and the Learning Center participate in this process, supporting in the same time the UNATC Doctoral School. The extent and breadth of the research and art projects are strongly supported by

partners at the national and international levels. UNATC research department promotes its activities via conferences, masterclasses, communication sessions, theatre workshops, etc., and regularly invites researchers from other fields and other countries to enrich the research outcomes.

Department has several dedicated staff, and mostly utilizes CINETIc building. Some of the projects presented during the visit, such are these related to creative digital techniques in cinematography, virtual and augmented reality, cognitive development, and applied psychology, show a high level of not only following but setting the trends in the field.

*Comments/Recommendations:*

***F.1. UNATC research & scholarship strategy is highly commended. The balance between the inclusion of various approaches from the theoretical research at various extents, experimenting, multidisciplinary, art production, etc., and stipulation for the teaching staff to conduct research and achieve recognition (including Ph.D.) results with the high quality of research and artistic production as well as teaching staff.***

**G. Community support and employability**

The UNATC's "Third mission" is mostly fulfilled via organized public events (mostly supported by external art producers, event organizers, and theatres). However, according to inputs during the meetings with employers and faculty representatives, most of these are organized thanks to private connections. Similarly, UNATC harvests input from external stakeholders when needed for internal activities.

There is a lack of systemic engagement of external partners in processes related to curriculum design, employability of graduates, etc. That results in the insufficient motivation of external stakeholders as there are no tools to make a real impact.

Meeting with graduates revealed another dimension of gaps that shall be bridged. Apparently, the program learning outcomes do not reflect the real needs of the labor market. For example, graduates of the Acting program learn theatre acting but lack certain practical skills if require to act in movies, television, or in commercials. Film graduates are apparently very narrowly specialized, with insufficient understanding of the overall movie production process.

In addition, fresh graduates struggle to understand the labor market conditions as frequently start their careers as freelancers.

*Comments/Recommendations:*

***G.1. Develop and implement the formal framework for the collaboration with the external stakeholders; which may include their representatives in some of the existing governing bodies, and establish specialized Advisory Boards that will participate in curriculum***

*design, delivery, and career guidance.*

*\*) In addition, refer to Recommendations D1 & D2 under “Educational Programs”*

## H. Facilities and Financial Resources

Besides extensive renovation of the main building (during COVID), and extensive utilization of all potential spaces within the complex, space is still insufficient to accommodate all classes:

- The overall teaching/learning space is around 6000 m<sup>2</sup>, which makes around 6.5 m<sup>2</sup> per student; such a standard is at the level of sufficiency for non-art disciplines.
- 97 teaching rooms and 31 lab are expected to accommodate students attending 36 various study programs; Regardless of the number that may indicate sufficiency, the size, quality, and equipment of learning spaces is not balanced to be equally utilized.

In addition, utilization of the CINETIc building is limited to specialized programs, Ph.D. students, and research. In order to improve the situation, the UNATC engages additional alternative spaces within the courtyard buildings.

On the other hand, UNATC extensively invests in modern teaching and professional, discipline-related equipment. The great benefit for in particular Film Academy students is the comparative access to traditional and technologically advanced equipment. In addition, some of the outdated movie production items are exposed in the UNATC museum or over the corridors to remind them of the past.

The provided budget breakdown does not clearly present the extent of funds and grants UNATC receives out of the state budget (e.g. European funds). However, overall reports are transparent and provided, and it looks like the current management manages to balance expenditures for the benefit of the organization.

Having in mind the size of the institution, the current human resources capacity (on both – academic and administrative sides) is not sufficient. However, regardless of the approved staffing, lack of funds dictates insufficient position fill, as well as the reduced motivation of skilled (academic) staff to apply.

### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*H.1. Explore how the potential changes in program structure may result in the optimization of spatial use.*

*H.2. Include funds from all financial sources in the comprehensive analysis to explore supporting some of the outstanding needs and inquire about additional optimization of expenditures.*



## I. Quality Management

The evaluation team was pleased to recognize that the number of key issues and challenges listed in the previous cycle evaluation report has been rectified. The student safety and the condition of the physical resources have been significantly improved. The managerial structure has been stabilized, and the overall financial situation improved. The website has been re-designed, and partnerships at the national and international levels strengthen. The library has been renovated to become more attractive to students. It is obvious that the current management possesses the skills and capacity to move the institution forward.

However, some of the issues remained outstanding and would require additional efforts, e.g. provision of professional psychological support to students.

The current situation with quality management is not so bright. The department in charge of quality resides on two levels under the Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs & Students, thus is too distant from the executive leadership to make an impact. The department acquires a few students to participate in activities, but they didn't attend the meeting to confirm the extent of their involvement. The overall quality system is not well developed, mostly due to insufficient awareness of the importance of continuous quality improvement (quality culture). Department staff mentioned that they are facing difficulties to motivate students to evaluate faculty or to participate in satisfaction surveys (not more than 20-25% of the student body). In addition, meeting attendees didn't provide sufficient evidence of how they facilitate quality improvement processes in order to close the "quality loop".

The program evaluation process is lacking "currency" – Learning Outcomes that are scaffolded from program to course level and vice versa.

The Ethics Committee is well organized and deals with cases that span from behavior to IP rights. The common norm to close the case is 30 days. Students that are members of the Committee (2 out of 8 members) didn't show up during the meeting so it remained unclear to what extent they participate in activities. Some of the cases the committee handles are quite sensitive and may require professional mediation or some other participation of the professional psychologist that is not available at the institution.

### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*1.1. Change the position of the quality assurance unit to report to Rector, and enhance the scope to all aspects of quality.*

*1.2. Prepare and deliver the quality culture campaign to raise awareness of all internal stakeholders regarding the necessity of continuous quality improvement.*

*1.3. Ensure that all quality-related processes "close the loop" by implementing a full PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle.*

*I.4. Support activities of the Ethic Committee by engaging professional psychological support (e.g. as a shared resource with the Student Counselling unit).*

*I.5. (for ARACIS) Stipulate Internal Quality Assurance systems and dedicated units' scope in accreditation standards and organize supportive workshops to guide institutions on how to enhance the quality Culture.*

*I.6. (for ARACIS) Explore ways to raise the culture of the outcome-based approach in higher education, with emphasis on cascading learning outcomes from program to course level and vice-versa, and aligning outcomes, teaching approach, and assessment methods.*

## J. Internationalization

UNATC is very active on the national and international stage. Leading the national “Arte University Consortium” which consists of seven Romanian peers higher education institutions, the university aims to promote the interests of university education in the field of arts.

The efforts of engagement with other national partners in the field of culture are also visible.

Within Erasmus+, UNATC maintains a partnership with seven European universities from France, Slovenia, Spain, Armenia & Sweden. Moreover, the university participates in a few European projects and provides some additional mobility opportunities.

However, the updated university website is available in Romanian only, which significantly limits the extent of the international exposure and footprint.

### *Comments/Recommendations:*

*J.1. Translate the university website in English and publish; maintain and update regularly the overall content, and emphasize opportunities for international students.*

*J.2. Enhance the engagement of international faculty members in doctoral evaluating committees.*

## CONCLUSIONS

*The National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale” – UNATC is a highly specialized educational institution with a long tradition and a unique impact on Romanian cultural scenery. Since the last evaluation, especially lead by the current leadership team, it has managed to overcome most of the inherited problems and resist disruptions triggered by the COVID pandemic. By transforming challenges into*

*opportunities, during the lockdown, it has even significantly improved working conditions by generally reconstructing the main campus.*

*However, in order to maintain continuous improvement, some of the evaluated areas still need to be addressed by additional action. That relates primarily to:*

- Revision of study programs to align them with the labor market needs and optimize delivery;*
- Enhancing capacities and processes in students' support and counseling;*
- Structuring the external stakeholders' engagement framework, and*
- Strengthening the overall internal quality assurance processes and capacities.*
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*Finally, the overall impression after the visit provides the trust that the leadership and the institution at large possess sufficient capacity to respond to these outstanding challenges, and we advise starting to draft action plans and acting upon them as soon as possible.*

*In Bucharest / Abu Dhabi  
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International Expert for Institutional Evaluation

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