



A R A C I S

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

External Institutional Evaluation

Universitatea “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași, România

Foreign Expert Report

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Peer of several
European National Quality Assurance Agencies

Member of the Pool of Experts
European University Association

1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” (UAIC) in Iași for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from January 14 to 16, 2015. Beside the institutional evaluation, 16 study programmes of UAIC were selected for assessment too. This was the second evaluation of UAIC after the ARACIS-visit in 2009, where the institution received the “high degree of confidence” rating.

During the last five years I have participated already in fourteen ARACIS-evaluations. As a member of the pool of experts of the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) I have participated in more than 20 evaluations in 7 European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Furthermore, I have also worked as a peer for the Lithuanian Center for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE). Hence the following observations and comments do not only reflect my Romanian experiences but also give European perspectives. My focus is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes. The self-evaluation process, international perspectives as well as governance and quality assurance are important core elements of my considerations.

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 evaluation process in a very efficient way and to all members of the ARACIS team for their constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Ms. Doina Stanciu 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 the visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Prof.univ.dr. Vasile Ișan from the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” in Iași for the friendly welcome and perfect organisation of my visit. Mr. Alexandru Daniel Toderașcu, a third year student working part time in the International Office of UAIC, was assisting me with translations and organisational tasks during the whole visit. I also want to express my appreciation to the various representatives of UAIC including students, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their discussions to a good understanding of the institution.

2. Organisational Details of the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”

The University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” (UAIC) in Iași was founded as University of Iași in 1860. The present University Palace was inaugurated in 1897. Today UAIC is one of the leading Romanian universities. It is nationally and internationally recognised for its education and research.

According to the Internal Quality Assessment Report 2013/14 (IQAR) the University is organised with 15 faculties, 27 academic departments and 27 corresponding scientific research departments, 2 interdisciplinary scientific research departments as well as 21 research centres and 4 excellence centres operating within several faculties. The IQAR is not totally clear with respect to the number of teaching positions and the number of students. The presented tables are partially contradicting. Similarly the information on study programmes needs some additional explanations. Some programmes seem to exist only on paper.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the government, from tuition-fees of students as well as from research and consulting. In the IQAR details are only given for the research income.

The University is governed by the Senate and the Administrative Council. The Senate is composed of 51 teachers and 17 students and - according to the Law of National Education 2011 – has the task to monitor and control the activity of the executive management. The Administrative Council is formed by the Rector, the 7 Pro-Rectors, the Deans, the General Administrative Director, one student and some other managers. UAIC is a big university and the organisational structure of UAIC is quite complex. The number of faculties is big and several faculties consist only of an academic department and a corresponding research department. The benefits of separating research from academic activities are not clear.

3. Outline of the Visit

Being one of the best Romanian universities UAIC is not in any existential risk. The University will certainly survive also the next 50 years without considerable changes. Hence the majority of its members does not feel a strong pressure to change anything. This makes it difficult for the university management to respond to new challenges and changing contexts.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

UAIC did not prepare a separate self-evaluation report for this ARACIS evaluation. The Internal Quality Assurance Report 2013/14 (IQAR) was provided for information. Naturally this Report is not very self-critical and does not contain any Swot Analysis. In addition, the data provided in the Report is not always consistent. The number of students in the year 2012/13 is given as 19177, probably counting only undergraduate students. The total number of teaching positions is given as 1407, but the detailed table shows 1761 positions including 84 research positions. Another table gives 94 Bachelor degree programmes but the following table shows only 79 such programmes. Evidently the bigger number also contains 13 distance-learning programmes and 2 part-time programmes, which were not considered separately in the table. The statistics with the completion rate has to be studied carefully too because students of the June and the February dates are added, what results in a total number of 42644 students. In order to compare the number of students with the number of students taking exams the June and the February candidates should have been better considered separately.

In my eyes UAIC has missed the opportunity to use this evaluation for a broad internal discussion of its present state and its future. This is surprising as UAIC has experienced an IEP-evaluation in 2012, a procedure, where the importance of the self-evaluation process for the development of a higher education institution is clearly emphasized. In general, I believe that the University should look more into the future than into its past. A healthy self-evaluation process resulting in a compact self-evaluation report of 25 to 30 pages concentrating on the improvements and changes since the last ARACIS visit in 2009 and describing the present situation (governing structure, budget, facilities, staff, students, study programmes, research, quality assurance, strategic planning and internationalisation) would have been a very useful experience for the institution and a very good basis for further strategic planning. The benefits of such a process arise from the necessity to set priorities and to concentrate on important things.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” in Iași began in the evening of January 13, 2015, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Moldova Hotel in Iași. During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on January 14 at 9:00 in the Senate Meeting Room of UAIC. Rector Prof.univ.dr. Vasile Ișan welcomed the ARACIS delegation and introduced the President of the Senate, the Pro-Rectors, the General Administrative Director and other university representatives. In his opening statement the Rector mentioned the problem of emigration of students and academics. Mission Director Prof.univ.dr. Ion Popa and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Răzvan Nistor presented the ARACIS evaluation team and explained the evaluation procedure.

In the course of the first day the ARACIS team performed the usual activities. We visited for nearly two hours the two European research projects RAMTECH (Research Center on Advanced Materials and Technologies) and CERNESIM (Centrul intergrat de studii în știința mediului pentru regiunea de dezvoltare nord-est), the University Museum with the exhibition on the Cucuteni culture and the Gaudeamus Student Hostel. The labs of the two research centres are exceptionally well equipped with expensive devices. We also met students working in the labs. The Museum is very well organized and the expositions are attractively arranged. The Gaudeamus Student Hostel complies with international standards.

In the afternoon I attended the meetings of the ARACIS team with about 100 students and about 90 graduates. A meeting with more than 40 employers next day concluded the ARACIS assemblies.

Beside the ARACIS-meetings I arranged individual meetings with the Rector, with the Pro-Rector for Quality Assurance, with the President of the Senate, with the General Administrative Director, with the Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics as well as visits to the Central Library, the historical library in the main building and the Aula Magna.

The meetings with the huge groups of students, graduates and employers did not really disclose any big problems. As usual students and graduates did not have severe complaints. A student of law mentioned problems with the recognition of credits from abroad, another one complained about the lack of places in the student hostels. Several students and graduates spoke for more support for internships and a better preparation for employment. Contact and information flow between regular students and their representatives in the different boards seem to be very loose. The involvement and engagement of students in UAIC’s activities and governing bodies is not noticeable. Graduates and employers argued for a broad education at the University, because special skills and competencies have to be learned anyhow in the job.

The evaluation visit ended Friday, January 16 at lunch time with an oral presentation of the impressions and results to the leaders of UAIC. The representatives of UAIC thanked the ARACIS team for their intensive and constructive work.

4. Governance and Institution

The leadership of the University shows very high identification with the institution and is highly committed. Despite that the Law 2011 allows different interpretation of the duties and

rights of the Rector and the Senate, the governing bodies at UAIC have developed a successful way to govern the institution. There exists a culture of consensus and co-operation which makes it possible to take also difficult and complex decisions within appropriate time. But the separation of tasks of the legislative bodies from the tasks of the executive organs is not well defined and there are several overlaps.

Similar to many other Romanian universities also UAIC has a favor for collective decisions. The size of the Senate with 68 members is quite big for a modern university governing body. The Senate should be a fast and efficient decision body concentrating on core academic issues, providing the rules and the legal framework for the institution and its administrative managers. For instance, the Senate should decide the rules for staff promotion but not discuss and decide individual promotions. Individual promotions according to the rules given by the Senate should be a task of the Rector and the Deans. The habit to take decisions on individuals to the Senate also contradicts privacy and means a terrible waste of time for university members. Another waist of academic working power is caused by the fact that several academic teachers hold also administrative positions.

Recommendations:

- Try to simplify the organisational structure and to streamline decision procedures.
- Limit the function of the Senate to core academic issues, the definition of the general framework for the Administrative Board and the monitoring of the institution.
- Reconsider the optimal size of the Senate in order to enable effective and fast decisions.
- Give the Rector and the Deans full responsibility for the operational management of the institution to ensure that they are able to respond to changing contexts and implement innovations.
- Try to avoid huge collective decision boards and exempt as many academic teachers as possible from administrative and bureaucratic work in order to give them time for teaching and research.
- Try to motivate students to take more responsibility and ownership for the development of the University.
- Introduce benchmarks and performance indicators drawn from comparable institutions.
- Even it is a general habit in Romania, UAIC should stop the carry-over of unrealistic vacant staff positions from year to year and open new positions when necessary. Similarly, only existing study programmes should be listed and programmes figuring only on paper should be at least marked.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already stated in the past I do not think that an ethic commission composed only by members from the institution can really handle sensitive cases. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from UAIC and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Culture

UAIC has set up important activities and procedures for quality assurance. At central level there exist the Commission for the Assessment and Management of Academic Quality and the Department for Quality Management chaired by a Pro-Rector. At faculty and department level

subcommittees for quality assessment and management are set up. In addition inter-university activities with leading Romanian universities are carried out. However, many university members still appear to consider quality assurance management as an obligation and have little understanding of its purpose and benefits. Hence in order to establish a real quality culture at UAIC the quality assurance actions should shift from inspection and control to an improve-oriented approach providing support to staff and students.

Recommendations:

- The collected data and the results of evaluations should be used more explicitly for further improvement of teaching, research and administration.
- Try to minimise burden of quality assurance procedures.
- Promote more clearly to staff and students the benefits and improvements deriving from quality assurance procedures in order to increase motivation of staff and students for taking ownership of quality assurance.
- Formalise the involvement of stakeholders and employers in order to monitor and improve the quality of education.

6. Teaching and Learning

The excellent quality of the formation at UAIC was recognized in the meetings with employers, graduates and students. Neither the meeting with about 100 students nor the meeting with about 90 graduates opened any severe problems. Both groups were perhaps little more active as usual in Romania but still not very critical with respect to possible weaknesses of the education. I think that the visited universities and ARACIS should reconsider limits for the size of the meetings with students, graduates and employers. Discussions within huge groups of more than 50 participants do not really contribute to a good knowledge of the institution or disclose problems. It is also somehow embarrassing to invite about 40 employers when there is only time for at most 10 participants to give a statement. The high fragmentation and specialisation of the study programmes (at least on paper) contradicts the demand of the graduates and employers for a broad education. The big number of similar programmes makes the selection of the appropriate programme difficult for students. Employers want to intensify language skills. Students and graduates want to expand internships and more support by the University for finding a place. In addition, the activities of the career centre should be expanded and give more support to students preparing them for the job market. The appointment of ECTS and the relation to workload was another point of discussion in the meetings. The involvement of stakeholders into curricula discussions seems to be very informal based on personal relations. In the meeting with graduates, it turned out that many of the attendees were following a master or PhD-programme at UAIC. The facilities in the library are very good. The canteen and the visited Gaudeamus dormitory are of international standard. The good involvement of students into research was visible during the visit. The advertising activities like Cuza Caravan in order to attract good students have to be commended.

Recommendations:

- Reconsider the number of different study programmes (especially in the master area) in order to offer a broad education and to make better use of synergies.
- Involve stakeholders systematically into curricula discussions.

- Increase assistance for students looking for an internship and strengthen the activities of the career centre in order to facilitate the start of graduates in the working world.
- Increase interdisciplinarity and flexibility of study programmes (optional courses, joint courses of different programmes, etc.).
- Make more clear the correspondence between ECTS and working load.

7. Research and Service to Society

UAIC has a strong research orientation and performs excellent research in several areas. This is expressed by the leadership of UAIC and is proved by research funds coming from national and international projects and by publications in international recognised journals. However, research is highly fragmented and of a large proportion grown historically. The organisation of research into research departments and research centres is complex.

Co-operations and consulting activities with the region (society, industry, economy) are mainly based on individual contacts and not on institutional relationships.

Recommendations:

- Develop a research strategy based on clear priorities and already existing fields of excellence.
- Try to simplify the organisational structure of research (number of research centres, separation of academic departments from research departments, etc.)
- Further increase visibility of research by intensifying international activities (e.g. participation in international research groups, publication in international recognised journals)
- Strengthen and extend relations with the region. Present examples of good consultancies and services to potential partners. Try to sign mutual contracts of co-operation in order to make income from collaborations sustainable.
- Support entrepreneurial activities of staff, graduates and students.

8. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is a multi-dimensional task taking into account mobility programmes, language policy, curricula, joint study and double degree programmes, collaborative research, conference attendance, etc. UAIC is very active with respect to many of these tasks but there is still room for improvement. Intentions to be internationally more visible and better known should go on. UAIC should intensify the promotion and advertisement of its excellent education and research in Romania and abroad.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation activities (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility of staff and students, research collaborations).
- Try to attract more international students by providing more information about the excellence of education and research at UAIC (e.g. extend activities of Cuza Caravan).

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Klagenfurt, 23.01.2015

Dear Doina;

Enclosed you find two signed copies of my report concerning the visit to the University "Alexandru Ioan Cuza".

Thank you once more for your invitation to join this interesting evaluation. It was very nice to work with you and this Team.

Best regards

