

Athenaeum University of Bucharest

External Institutional Evaluation Report

January 2022

Introduction

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for the institutional evaluation of Athenaeum University of Bucharest (AUB). Prior to the site visit, I studied the English version of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) of AUB. During the visit, which was carried out online due to the pandemic restrictions from January 11 to January 14, 2022, I had a good opportunity to build upon the information I had received about AUB and its operation.

The site visit started with a preliminary online meeting of experts as members of the evaluation team. At this meeting, preparation and harmonization of evaluation stages in the blended format was discussed. Then, an online meeting with the leading representatives of the AUB took place. During the whole period of evaluation, I had a chance to participate in several plenary/group meetings with representatives of the AUB teaching staff, students, alumni and employers of AUB graduates. A series of individual meetings as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions within AUB and beyond followed during the site visit. This way I met representatives of the executive management (across the structure: university, faculties, departments and other units), members of the AUB Senate, the staff in charge of teaching, research, international relations, quality assurance, student support services, students and other relevant persons.

During the site visit, I received additional documents related to some aspects of the operation of AUB 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 some other aspects of AUB operation for the purpose of its evaluation.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Sorin Alecsa, 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 led by Prof. Dorian Cojocaru, head of the mission, and Prof. Adela Socol, coordinator of the expert evaluators' team. All these activities were very helpful. Also, I would like to express my thanks to Ms. Iulia Bindileu for her excellent translations during all these meetings.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned, I herewith submit my report on AUB's institutional performance as I have perceived it. I am well 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 AUB and ARACIS with opinions with the aim to contribute to possible improvements at the AUB and quality assurance of higher education in Romania.

Mission statement

AUB is a private higher education institution established in 1990.

The mission statement is part of the AUB Charter. The mission is ‘to promote a creative and innovative learning and research environment in order to train specialists capable of supporting economic and social progress’ (SAR, p. 7). It appears that the mission statement aims explicitly at two of the three pillars of higher education institutions (education and research) while the ‘third role’ (public reach) is somewhat implicit or even missing at all.

Current development strategy of AUB (for the 2020-2024 period) includes a set of priority objectives such as, in the first place, diversification of the educational offer, improvement of the quality of study programmes, student-centred education, better visibility of the institution on both national and international scales, support for research activities, leveraging digital education opportunities, human resource policy coherence, development of culture of quality, increase of financial resources (SAR, pp. 8-9). These strategic objectives, ambitious as they are, seem to be creating a relatively complex aggregate. The link among these objectives is straightforward; so is the way the mission statement is formulated.

Annual operational plans seem to be a more concrete instrument for realizing these objectives and/or strategic plan.

It may be concluded that the mission of AUB appears as having potential to support strategic planning. A more balanced focus on all three main domains of higher education institutions would be desirable.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to reformulate the mission statement so that it clearly reflects the three main pillars of higher education institutions: education, research and public reach.*
- *Consider possibilities to include attention to the third role of higher education institutions in AUB strategic documents, namely its strategic objectives.*

Academic freedom and academic integrity

AUB pays attention to issues of academic freedom and academic integrity. The institution under evaluation has its Code of Ethics and Academic Professional Conduct in which values of academic freedom, academic autonomy and ethical integrity are emphasized.

The AUB Charter deals with the ethic and professional deontology and the Code of Ethics is a supplement to the provisions of the Charter.

The main body dealing with ethical issues at AUB is the Ethics Committee. It is composed of five members (three representatives of the teaching staff, one of the administrative staff and one student representative). During the interviews it appeared that their agenda consists mainly in reacting to issues/cases of ethical nature, which rarely appear; no tendency towards a more proactive approach of this Committee was evidenced.

Plagiarism is one the issues AUB is trying to eliminate. AUB uses systemantiplagiat.ro, a

software designed to prevent plagiarism of students' and academic works. However, its use is subject to a charge.

Attention to ethical issues is also projected in the curriculum of master programmes. Starting with the 2018/2019 academic year, master degree programmes have included the compulsory subject of 'Ethics and Academic Integrity'.

AUB bodies seem to be in compliance with legislation and provide its faculties with appropriate academic freedom.

Recommendation:

- *Consider possibilities to develop a more proactive agenda of the Ethical Committee at AUB.*

Organization and management

AUB has a number of regulatory documents determining the organization and management processes in the institution.

Its governing bodies are the Senate and Board of Trustees (university level), Faculty Council (faculty level), and Department Council (department level).

The leadership positions within the institution are as follows: university president, president of the senate, chair of the board of directors, rector, vice-rectors (university level), dean and provost (faculty level), and head of department (department level). It must be pointed out that AUB is a relatively small institution the size of which seems to determine the everyday functioning and interaction of these bodies. Due to this, there are certain overlaps in positions within faculties as well as the university. This is not a favourable situation in terms of people who have to play different roles in these managerial structures and bodies.

The Senate is composed in of the academic staff (75%) and students (25%). Faculties seem to be represented proportionally in the composition of the Senate.

AUB is structured into two faculties (Economic Sciences, Public Administration); these are further organized into departments.

The principles of organization and functioning of AUB are described in the SAR. They seem to provide a solid basis for the main areas of institutional operation.

Electoral regulations stipulate a transparent procedure to elect the leaders of the institution in both executive and governing bodies/positions.

AUB Students are represented in consultative, decision-making and executive structures, namely the University Senate and Faculty Councils.

Academic programmes and student management

AUB currently runs several programmes at the bachelor level and several programmes at the master level, most of them accredited while some running in the ‘authorisation provisional’ regime. They are organized as full-time programmes. There is a great deal of flexibility in the organization of studies because many students have jobs at the same time. Afternoon classes seem to be a typical response in this context (during the interviews, some students and alumni suggested that the afternoon classes should start even later).

The academic programmes seem to be in correspondence with AUB’s mission statement and international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum can be considered appropriate for the academic degrees awarded; the programmes are featured by a combination of professional and transversal knowledge and skills. All programmes seem to be well thought out, regularly monitored and evaluated/updated whenever necessary. Students, alumni as well as employers seem to have opportunities to participate in discussions about the programmes.

According to the SAR, a total of 450 students studied the AUB programmes (303 bachelor level students and 147 master level students) in the 2020/2021 academic year.

The admission procedures, for which AUB uses its own methodology, are in accordance with legislation.

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

Final examination procedures seem to be clear and acceptably organized. Students’ final theses are supposed to contain both scientific and applied research components (at master level in particular). However, the staff is not specifically trained to lead the supervision process.

With the diploma, an annex is issued to all graduates giving information about their educational pathway.

AUB pays attention to the employability of graduates in the labour market. AUB’s career counselling body collects data on this issue by means of questionnaires for graduates and some other ways. The data available mostly indicate graduates’ favourable position and involvement in the labour market.

What can be perceived as a problem is a relatively high dropout rate of students at AUB. The institution’s representatives tend to see the reasons in external factors and cannot identify internal options for improvement. It appears that the situation at AUB can be specific in that most students have jobs, but studies on student retention across nations typically find a mixture of external and reasons for such a case.¹

Questionnaires on student satisfaction are used to get feedback on study programmes. According to the SAR, the satisfaction rate is good. This was confirmed by students during interviews. As already mentioned, feedback from alumni and employers is also asked for in this context.

¹ See for instance: <https://uplanner.com/en/blog/8-causas-de-desercion-estudiantil-en-la-educacion-superior/>
<https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/rev3.3202>

As indicated, one of the strategic objectives is development of student-centred approach at AUB. In some extent, this seems to be reflected in AUB's work with the learning outcomes, teaching methods, efforts to keep the learning dialogue with students, student learning support services and material support for teaching/learning including digitization elements to make distant forms of teaching/learning possible in times of the pandemic.

Within the framework of student support services, students are provided with consultations, tutoring as well as career counselling and guidance to help them plan and manage their learning pathway.

Internships seem to be a part of study programmes. AUB has a number of external partners (institutions) who can offer students opportunities to learn in practice. It was not always clear how the learning process is arranged and supervised during internships and how the dialogue among students, AUB and the organization where internship takes place is arranged.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to provide the staff with training in thesis supervision process.*
- *Consider possibilities to analyse more closely the reasons for the high dropout rate.*
- *Make sure student internships are arranged so that student learning is followed and supported in a professional dialogue among AUB, the hosting organization and the student.*

Internationalization

The international dimension of teaching, research and public reach at AUB is rather limited.

The international ties of the institution are modest; so far AUB has mainly been focused on developing relations within the Romanian context. Student/staff international mobility in both directions is underdeveloped.

AUB does not seem to be internationally networked and anchored on a large scale. The international profile of its main activities is rather poor and the international visibility of the institution is low. The current strategic plan of AUB emphasizes the need to change this significantly.

Perhaps one of the first sights in this direction can be the fact that AUB has been awarded the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-2027 quality certificate. This will hopefully open up the door to internationalisation. Nevertheless, the website of the institution still does not have an English version or any version other than Romanian.

Recommendations:

- *Make sure students and the staff have a decent chance for international mobility.*
- *Make sure there are incoming students and staff from other HEIs in Romania and abroad.*
- *Make sure an English version of AUB's website is created.*

Research

In the mission statement and the strategic plan (strategic objectives), research is declared to be one of the pillars of AUB's operation.

The academic staff is expected to involve in research and have publication results. In fact, as stated in the SAR, some results have been achieved, but it is not very clear how much support the academic staff gets from the institution to meet this expectation.

Research at AUB seems to be rather a matter of individual activities without a clear management/leadership support. This particularly relates to financial support. AUB does not seem to be providing effective internal funding of research activities. In some extent, organization of and participation of the staff in scientific events is supported. External funding for research is scarce at AUB.

Such a situation has an impact on student research and opportunities to develop productive links between teaching and research. Despite this, several publication results were reported by the AUB staff. The institution publishes its own journal (Internal Auditing and Risk Management) and organizes conferences and other relevant events.

There is no evidence of student research funding.

In general, research is currently not a high profile at AUB.

Recommendations:

- *Consider possibilities to introduce an internal granting scheme to support the research activities of the academic staff.*
- *Consider possibilities to support more effectively student research activities.*
- *Consider possibilities to find more opportunities for applied research funding in cooperation with your external partners.*

Staff

AUB seems to have a qualified staff capable of providing current portfolio of educational programmes.

According to the SAR, the teaching staff of AUB consisted of 19 full professors and 3 associate professors during the 2020/2021 academic year. If this is really the case, it is questionable who the work of assistant professors does and what the strategy of human resource development at AUB is.

According to the interviews, some staff development activities are under way, most of them related to teaching skills including online teaching at AUB.

Regular evaluation is an integral part of working with the staff. This includes a variety of evaluation methods that can possibly produce improvements.

During the interviews, students and alumni were very positive about the academic staff as well as about the administration support.

Recommendation:

- *Consider possibilities to develop the academic staff body which is well proportionate as for the presence of senior and junior staff.*

Finance and infrastructure & premises and equipment

AUB's financial resources are composed of tuition fees and income from other institutional activities, donations and sponsorships, income from research and revenues from grant projects.

The budget is drawn up at the level of the university, not for each faculty or department. This is understandable considering the size of the institution.

Various types of school fees are fixed annually. The students seem to be well informed about the financial conditions and options available for financial assistance.

Financial accounting is outsourced (SC DKL Accounting Partners).

AUB declares to have adequate financial resources to carry out its mission and objectives.

As for the material basis, I could rely on documentation and reporting from fellow members of the evaluation panel who had opportunities to visit AUB's premises.

AUB has its own premises with all rooms necessary for operation including administrative headquarters, lecture halls, seminar rooms, a computer lab, a library and other facilities. The premises seem to be on an acceptable level including equipment.

Accommodation services are provided as based on a contract with Bioterra University of Bucharest. According to the SAR, the Traian Theoretical High School provides a gym for sports activities.

AUB runs a new IT platform with two parallel systems for teaching and administration. Technical assistance is provided to the staff.

According to reports available, the library has more than 27 thousand volumes in print and digitized formats. There are two reading rooms with 43 seats in the library. The virtual library makes it possible for students and the staff to access the relevant databases AUB has subscribed for.

Quality management

According to the SAR (p. 7), 'quality assurance in teaching and scientific research is the basic concern and responsibility of the University'.

It can be said that quality assurance (QA) of the main processes is attended adequately at AUB. The structure and processes of quality assurance are developed on a solid base. This applies mainly to teaching while research is probably a little neglected.

Established at the level of the university, the Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance (CEQA) is the responsible body in this field. The Commission is focused on domains such as QA policies, strategies and procedures, methodologies of programme evaluation and student evaluation, quality of teaching staff performance and evaluation of the learning process.

Reportedly, QA committees operate on the level of faculties while QA officers work at the level of departments and administrative structures. The QA agenda as a whole is part of the portfolio of the rector.

Students of all programmes are required to provide feedback on teaching with focus on the quality of information received, teachers' professional competence and skills, links between theory and practice, student-teacher relationship, stimulation of student creativity, clarity of teaching, innovativeness of teaching approaches and other items. It is not clear how students are informed about what happens with their feedback. Neither is it clear whether and how the teaching staff, whose work is evaluated by students, can respond to students' feedback and explain the reasons for their work/approach.

During the interviews, alumni and employers' representatives confirmed they can access discussions about programmes and other aspects of operation in the form of feedback to AUB.

It may be concluded that quality management is organized adequately, containing a series of processes and focused on relevant areas of evaluation and options of improvement (with particular emphasis on the process of teaching).

Recommendations:

- *Make sure QA in research is attended adequately.*
- *Make sure students are informed about what happens with the feedback they have provided on teaching.*
- *Make sure the teaching staff have reasonable opportunities to respond to student evaluation.*

Final recommendation

I recommend providing Athenaeum University of Bucharest with institutional accreditation.

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