

A R A C I S

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

E x t e r n a l I n s t i t u t i o n a l E v a l u a t i o n

Universitatea “Adventus” din Cernica, România

F o r e i g n E x p e r t R e p o r t

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em.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Winfried Müller
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

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1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the Institutional Evaluation of the Adventus University in Cernica (AUC) by ARACIS from May 20 to 26, 2021. This evaluation during the Covid-19 pandemic was performed following the ARACIS guidelines on conducting external institutional evaluation in a blended format. ARACIS and AUC had arranged online conferences for all the usual meetings during the on-site visits. As this evaluation was already my second experience with an ARACIS evaluation in blended format everything worked very well. Knowing the regular ARACIS procedure for institutional evaluations was a big advantage. The fact that AUC is a very small private university with a special dedication made the process on the one hand easier but more sensitive on the other hand. Overall, I want to congratulate ARACIS and AUC for having made this evaluation possible during the difficult time of the pandemic.

Beside the institutional evaluation, the Bachelor degree study programme “Social Work” was selected for assessment too. This evaluation of AUC is the second evaluation of the institution by ARACIS after the ARACIS visit in 2015, when the institution received the ARACIS “confidence” rating.

During the last 20 years I have participated in nearly 50 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions (thereof 27 in Romania) in nine European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence, the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with AUC but also give international perspectives.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof.univ. Dr. Adrian Opre and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ. Dr. Dumitru Miron for the friendly welcome into the Team and for conducting this extraordinary evaluation process in a very efficient and careful way. My special thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mrs. Marilena Dobre 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 procedure.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Laurențiu Florentin Moț from AUC for the friendly contact and for assisting me before and during the evaluation by answering questions and by the arrangement of several individual online meetings with representatives of the University.

2. Adventus University in Cernica (AUC)

The Adventus University is located in Cernica, a commune in the southeast part of Ilfov County in Romania. The first Adventist Biblical Institute was established in 1924 in Focșani. After moving to Dicioisânmartin (Târnaveni) 1926 and to Brasov-Stupini in 1931, the Institute was established in Bucharest 1951 under the name of Adventist Theological Seminary. Since then, the Institute has operated in several places in Bucharest, until the move to the current facilities in Cernica, Ilfov, in 1997.

In 1992 the Adventist Biblical Institute was authorized by the Romanian government and became the Adventist Theological Institute of university level for the areas of Adventist Theology: Pastoral Theology, Romanian Literature and Social Work. The authorization of the Romanian Language and Literature–English Language and Literature study programme followed in 2007, the accreditation of the Social Work study programme, the authorization of the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-school Education programme and the accreditation of the Adventist Pastoral Theology study programme in 2008.

Together with the ARACIS institutional evaluation of the Adventist Theological Institute in Cernica in 2015, the Pastoral Theology and Social Work Study Programmes were reassessed. In 2019 the periodic re-evaluation of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education programme took place.

By Law 277/2017 the Adventist Theological Institute became the Adventus University in Cernica, a Romanian higher education institution of private law and public utility.

AUC plays an important role for the cultural, social and economic development of the Adventist community in Romania and more widely.

According to the Romanian Law of National Education 2011, AUC is governed by the Board of Directors, the Senate, the Rector and the Administrative Council. The Board of Directors represents the Romanian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and defines the mission, endorses the strategic and operational plan and decides on all important financial issues of AUC. The Senate provides the legal framework and rules for the operational management of the institution. It consists of 13 members (4 students). The Rector is responsible for the operational management of the institution and represent the institution to the outside. The Rector, the Dean, the General Director of Administration, the Chaplain of AUC, the President of the Senate, the President of the Board of Directors and the Director of Education Department of the Romanian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church form the Administrative Council of the University.

The Address of AUC is Șos. Decebal, nr. 11-13, Cernica, Ilfov. According to the provided information and the observations made during previous evaluations and on-site visit by the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ. Dr. Dumitru Miron on May 21, the patrimony of AUC is well managed. Buildings, lecture rooms and other facilities are up to date and of international standard. According to the provided information access for disabled persons is made possible.

AUC is organised in one Faculty, namely the Faculty of Theology and Social Sciences, and there is only one Department, namely the Department of Theology-Social Work-Sciences of Education.

The University currently offers three Bachelor programmes, the Adventist pastoral theology (4 years), Social work (3 years) and Primary and preschool education (3 years).

In the academic year 2020/21 there were 166 students (Adventist pastoral theology 45, social work 39, primary and preschool-education 82) enrolled at AUC.

The teaching body of AUC in the academic year 2020/21 consists of 31 lecturers of whom 17 are tenured with full time employment and 14 are associate professors. In addition, there are 31 non-teaching and auxiliary staff working at AUC.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the Seventh-day Adventist Church and fees from students. According to the provided information the revenue in 2019 was 7.293.996,25 Lei, of which 5.492.254,57 Lei (75%) came from the Church. The expenditure on salaries was 3.533.983 Lei, which represents 52% of the total expenditure of 6.769.152 Lei. This ensures a sustainable financial situation, provided that the contribution of the Church will go on in the same magnitude.

3. Outline of the Visit

AUC has undergone an ARACIS institutional evaluation in 2015 and was visited by the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities recently in 2011, 2015 and 2018. Evidently, the institution has learned and benefited from these evaluations.

3.1 Self-Evaluation Report

AUC has elaborated a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of 56 pages and 6 pages listing annexes for this ARACIS evaluation. The SER gives a very good view of the institution and describes all important items. The quality of the SER has to be commended. Nevertheless, there is some redundancy of the sections 1.3 University Structure and 1.4 Performance Indicators ...with the chapter A1: Institutional, administrative and managerial structures, that should have been avoided. On the other hand, the inclusion of a SWOT analysis revealing strengths and weaknesses of AUC could have enriched the SER.

3.2 External Institutional Evaluation in Blended Format

As already mentioned, the institutional evaluation of the Adventus University in Cernica (AUC) was prepared in accordance with the ARACIS guidelines on conducting external evaluation in a blended format.

During the evaluation, I participated in the online meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Thursday, May 20

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on May 20 at 9:00 with a preliminary online meeting of the ARACIS team.

In the following online meeting at 10:00 together with the representatives of AUC the participating persons were introduced and the details of the institutional evaluation were

established. Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Laurențiu Florentin Moț welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The main problem of this evaluation was how to perform successfully all necessary examinations in order to fulfil with the ARACIS requirements. According to the guidelines the evaluation procedure was extended from 3 to 5 days. Wherever it was possible, the usual evaluation activities were performed in form of video conferences. From 11:00 to 12:00 there was an online meeting of the review team with the teaching staff of AUC. In this meeting participated 14 members of AUC. They reported on their activities concerning teaching, research, supervision and assisting of students, social engagement, community work, etc.

Subsequently I had several private online meetings:

12:10-12:35 with the President of the Board Pastor Aurel Neațu,

12:35-12:55 with the Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Laurențiu Florentin Moț,

12:55-13:10 with the President of Senate Conf.univ. Dr. Zoltán Szallós-Farkas and

13:10-13:30 with the Chaplain of AUC Pastor George Șchiopu.

We spoke about the expectations concerning this evaluation, the vision for AUC in 2030 and discussed the distribution of responsibilities and duties between the management bodies of AUC according to the Romanian Law of National Education 2011. I suggested some modification with respect to the internal organization (e.g. position of the Rector, Publishing House should be subordinated to the Rector). A common wish of all university functionaries was the establishment of Master programmes and of a PhD study in Theology at AUC.

Friday, May 21

I continued my review activities at institutional and programme level. A part of the ARACIS team made an on-site visit to AUC in order to complement the written information.

Monday, May 24

The evaluation work began at 09:00 with an online technical meeting of the review team.

From 10:00 to 11:15 there was an online meeting of the review team with students of AUC.

More than 30 students participated in this meeting. In addition, at 11:30 I had a private online meeting with 5 students.

Teaching aspects especially under pandemic restrictions, practical parts in curricula and work experience, student services, mobility, etc. were discussed. Students at AUC were commonly positive, but there was mentioned that students were not informed on results and consequences of the evaluation of teaching. Moreover, students claimed for a student representative also in the Administrative Council.

Tuesday, May 25

The day started again with an online technical meeting of the ARACIS team at 9:00. All members of the review team gave a short report on their findings so far.

From 10:00 to 11:30 followed an online meeting with graduates of AUC. This meeting was joined by about 25 graduates. As usual no severe problems were disclosed. Noticeable was

the strong spiritual bond with AUC and high appreciation of the institution. Several graduates reported on their work, especially in the area of social welfare. Many of them continued their studies with a master at another Romanian university.

From 11:30 to 13:00 the ARACIS team had an online meeting with about 15 employers of graduates of AUC. The big range of engagements of the graduates was praised. The work and participation of the graduates in projects and activities in the fields of social welfare, healthcare, nursing, teaching and pastoral work were commended. Also, the employers expressed the wish for Master studies and a PhD programme at AUC.

Wednesday, May 26

At 11:00 the review team met for a debriefing. The different experts gave a short presentation of their findings and views during the evaluation.

The evaluation visit ended with a meeting of the ARACIS team with the representatives of AUC from 12:00 to 13:00. For this meeting I was provided with a second connection with an interpreter translating the discussion into English. Impressions and results of the evaluation visit were presented to the leaders of AUC. Rector Conf.univ. Dr. Laurențiu Florentin Moț thanked the ARACIS team for their careful work under the difficult conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Governance and Institution

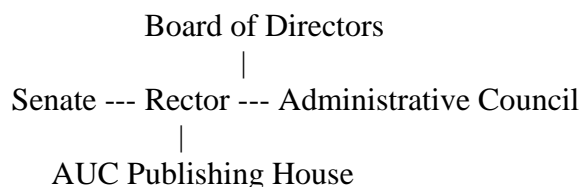
AUC is a very distinctive type of HE institution, having university status and being a private institution under the directive of the Adventist Church. But the institution seems to manage quite well this dual nature of its mission, keeping the institution in agreement with the regulations given by ARACIS and the Romanian legislation as well as by the Adventist philosophy of education. As already mentioned, AUC has been frequently evaluated by ARACIS and the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges and Universities during the last ten years and has learned and benefited a lot from these evaluations (e.g. excellent documentation, clear view of the institution and its future, very good strategical planning and corresponding operational plans, transparent staff recruitment procedures and clear student recruitment, etc.). AUC's intention to start Master and PhD studies makes sense with respect to completion of the study offer and sustainability of the institution.

Leadership at AUC is highly-motivated and there have been significant improvements over the last years. There is a strong support of the institution by the Adventist Church. The campus is very nice and the facilities correspond to the current standard.

During the institutional evaluation procedure neither the provided documents nor the meetings and the on-site visit by some members of the ARACIS team have disclosed any severe problems or legal violations. But there seems to exist still some room for improvements.

Modern universities require a strong rectorate and clear and fast decision-making procedures. Especially, at small institutions it is essential to save human resources and to avoid any overlapping of responsibilities. There exists a culture of consensus and co-operation between the governing bodies of AUC, but the distribution of tasks of the Senate and the Rector seems not to be completely clarified. In the same sense the agendas of the Senate and the Faculty Council appear to overlap and present multiple decision-making procedures.

Hence, I suggest to reconsider the institution's organigram and put the governing bodies Senate, Rector and Administrative Council on the same level and define clearly the corresponding responsibilities according to the Romanian Law of National Education 2011 (Rector is responsible for the operational management of the institution and the Senate for the strategic decisions and general regulations). For example, the AUC Publishing House should be subordinated to the Rector and not to the Senate. Furthermore, any decisions concerning concrete staff and student matters should be made by the Rector, the Dean or the Head of the Department.



Furthermore, I could see no clear reason why, in the interest of simplifying the structure of a small institution such as AUC, the Senate might not also assume the tasks of the Faculty Council and to have only one body acting as Senate and Faculty Council.

Another field, where I recommend to the leaders of AUC to reconsider the current situation, is the area of student participation and representation. The establishment of two student Deans has to be commended. But I cannot see any reason why there are no student representatives in the Administrative Council and in the decision committee for scholarships. Including students into all decision bodies motivates them to take more responsibility and ownership for the development of AUC.

Recommendations:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities of all decision-making bodies of AUC with the goal of simplification and avoiding duplication. Define precisely the responsibilities of commissions (Senate, Faculty Council, Department Council) and monocratic bodies (Rector, Dean, Head of Department) in view of the Law of National Education 2011.
- Reconsider student representation and student participation in all decision bodies of AUC.
- The planned Master and PhD studies at AUC should be organized at the beginning in co-operation with other universities and HE institutions.
- AUC leaders should support staff and students as much as possible in order to keep overall burden to a tolerable level.

- The existence and work of the Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already mentioned on other occasions, especially in the case of a small institution an ethic commission formed by members only from the institution will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct of senior university members. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally – an inter-university commission with half members coming from AUC and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Assurance (QA)

All members of AUC seem to be fully aware of the importance of QA and high-quality teaching. An antiplagiarism system has been installed. The students take an active part in the evaluation of teaching, but complain that they are not informed on evaluation results nor on consequences.

Recommendations:

- Further strengthen certain internal quality arrangements (e.g. benchmarking with comparable institutions).
- Make clear to all university members the use of evaluation results for strategic decisions.
- Increase the visibility of course evaluation results and consequences for students in order to motivate them to participate actively in QA procedures.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality and importance of the education at AUC was generally recognized in all sessions. The relations between the teachers and the students are very good and the student-teacher ratio with 5,35 is excellent. The Chaplain plays an important role for the welfare of students and works as mediator in case of problems.

But some students criticized that the Bologna ideas were not fully implemented. So, there were nearly no optional courses within the curricula. The wish to have more elective courses integrated into the curricula and to increase self-learning parts was mentioned.

Recommendations:

- Some of the Bologna ideas such as internationalization (language policy, mobility), elective courses (e.g. comparative religious studies), student participation (e.g. Administrative Council), etc. should be further strengthened.

7. Research and Service to Society

The small size of AUC does not really favour research. Ongoing research and research results have been made more visible during the last years. But co-operations with similar institutions and with private actors in research could be still strengthened.

As already mentioned the service to society of AUC is great. The social engagement of students, graduates and staff is enormous. All members of AUC are engaged into volunteer work.

Recommendations:

- Expand the co-operation with other research groups in Romania and abroad.
- Create additional administrative support for the realization of research co-operations in order to reduce bureaucratic work for researchers.

8. Internationalisation

Against the background of the international Adventist Church, AUC has an excellent starting position for international activities. AUC has joined the ERASMUS program but the institution's strategy for internationalisation seems to be very general and not focused very much on its core strengths. Staff and students mention some links with other institutions, but I could not find any concrete details of partnerships and co-operations.

One positive affect of the pandemic was, that we have learned a lot about online-teaching. We should use these experiences to engage teachers from other universities (national and abroad) to give online-courses at AUC without being necessarily on-site.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility, research collaborations, double degree curricula, etc.).
- Benchmark with similar institutions and compare key parameters (curricula, research, mobility numbers, etc.)
- Strengthen internationalisation at home by offering courses given in English language in all study programmes.
- Contract teachers from other universities to give online courses at AUC.
- In order to increase international visibility and to attract also foreign students, any new postgraduate progammes should be offered in English language.

9. Final Remarks

AUC is a small but well-established university with strong leadership, highly motivated staff, committed students and very favourable support from the Adventist Church. Therefore, AUC has an excellent basis to meet its dual accountability to both the Romanian Ministry of Education, for its recognition as a university, and the Adventist Church, of which it is an educational institution. AUC 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 AUC will continue to contribute to the Romanian society through education, research and its great social engagement

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

Winfried Müller

em.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Winfried Müller