

Stefan cel Mare University (USV) - External Institutional Evaluation Report

27-30 October 2024

1., 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.

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for the institutional evaluation of Stefan cel Mare University. Prior to the site visit, I had studied the English version of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of the Stefan cel Mare University and some other documents. During the visit, which was carried out on-site from 28th to 30th of October 2024. I had a very good opportunity to build upon the information I had received about the Stefan cel Mare University 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 Stefan cel Mare University. During the whole period of evaluation, I had a chance to participate in several plenary/group meetings with representatives of the Stefan cel Mare University teaching staff, students, alumni and also the employers of graduates of the Stefan cel Mare University. Besides, a series of individual meetings, as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions within the Stefan cel Mare University 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 Stefan cel Mare University 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 Stefan cel Mare University.

I would like to express my gratitude to Ms. Paraschuv Florentina, 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 the Evaluation director Prof.univ.dr. STAN Vasilica and Prof.univ.dr. BÁCS Miklós, the coordinator of the expert evaluators' team.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned above, I herewith submit my report on the Stefan cel Mare University'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 Stefan cel Mare University and ARACIS with opinions with the aim to contribute to possible improvements at the Stefan cel Mare University and the quality assurance of the higher education in Romania.

2., General statements

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 89 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.

USV is currently a comprehensive university with a mixed structure, which provides study programs in all fundamental fields: mathematics and natural sciences, engineering, biological, biomedical and social sciences, humanities and arts, sports science and physical education, organised into 11 faculties.

Mission statement

USV assumes its mission of: Provider of education, and highly qualified human resources for society. Provider of knowledge, through scientific research and technological innovation. Service provider for the community, through consultancy, technological transfer, and advanced knowledge capable of ensuring the development and economic growth of society.

Located at the crossroads of major European cultures and civilisations, USV aims to promote tolerance for cultural diversity and pluralism, support multilingualism and positive intercultural, interethnic, and interfaith dialogue, advance gender parity and eradicate all forms of discrimination, and fortify connections with Romanians living beyond the border, particularly those from the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

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

The Strategic Plan of the USV 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 USV.

Recommendation:

- *Make sure key strategic documents are available in English and publicly accessible.*

Academic freedom and academic integrity

USV respects the dignity of each of its members and promotes academic integrity. The University's Code of Ethics explicitly states the ideals, principles and moral norms that the members of the academic community agree to respect and follow in their professional activity, contributes to a climate based on cooperation and competition, and increases the university's prestige.

The USV 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 USV.

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

Recommendation:

- *Consider publishing key documents related to academic freedom and academic integrity also in English.*

3., Organisation and management

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

The USV's entire activity, including managerial activities, at all levels, is subordinate to the Senate's mission and strategic objectives.

The USV 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 permanent improvement of administration activities consistent with European standards has been achieved by implementing development policies and training programmes for the administrative personnel and by annual evaluations of the professional achievements corresponding to the professional standards set down by the job description prepared by the division heads.

The implementation of the university strategy is done following the planning of activities described by the strategic plan of the university, developed for a period of 5 years.

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 USV.

Recommendation:

- *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.*

4., Teaching staff

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

USV has a clear policy of attracting quality teachers and researchers, holders of scientific titles obtained in prestigious universities, as well as promoting young graduates. The USV offers

equal opportunities, without gender discrimination or based on other criteria, to candidates for teaching positions.

393 teaching staff (371 full-time and 22 fixed-term employees) with the rank of professors, associate professors, lecturers, and assistant professors, as of October 1, 2023, do teaching activities.

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.

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:

- *Make sure the workload of each academic staff category is properly balanced, as for the teaching, research and the public reach.*
- *The future of the University relays on young academics, so it should be in University aim to increase their number of provide conditions for continues development.*
- *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.*

5., Academic programmes and student management

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

The USV's university marketing policy promotes the image of a dynamic institution through campaigns that provide accurate information about study programs offered, available facilities, and the achievements of teaching staff, graduates and students.

Special attention is paid to promoting the USV and its educational programs in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as well as at educational fairs in Asia. In order to also recruit foreign students, USV has extended its educational activities by initiating study programs taught in international languages and offering intensive Romanian language courses.

The University organizes several dual-degree Bachelor and Master programs of studies in English. The number of foreign students has steadily increased, having doubled in the last five years.

Temporary student mobility has been performed in the USV on the basis of agreements signed between Romanian universities and universities abroad.

To verify the effectiveness of the study programs offered, the Career Counseling and Guidance Center of the university monitors annually, through appropriate tools (questionnaires, interviews, surveys among graduates and master's students), the way of capitalizing on the professional skills of graduates, the level of satisfaction of graduates and their insertion in the labor market.

The Career Guidance Centers offers psychological support tailored based on student individual needs. Students have the opportunity to book and appointment or present directly to the office of the center. The center also provides psychological support and career advice to students with disabilities.

Through professional counselling Career Guidance Centers contribute to the planning of the direction of the students' and of the graduates' careers by mainly focusing on: Identifying the professional interests and the abilities through specific screenings. Assistance in the creation of the instruments used to search for a job: a CV, a motivation letter. Training for selection interviews for jobs. Support in taking decisions regarding the career and in creating a personalized plan. The identification of opportunities to develop the abilities and competences necessary on the labour market.

Through Coach USV project, researchers from abroad are offered intensive courses in Romanian language to enhance collaboration in various research fields.

The academic programmes are in correspondence with the USV'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.

Students' study paths have a certain degree of flexibility.

The teaching strategy also takes into account the needs of students with disabilities by adapting teaching and examination methods to their specific needs and abilities to ensure equal access to learning resources.

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 USV.

Every subject has at least one documentation available.

USV teaching staff are at the disposal of students and are appointed as year tutors at the beginning of each academic year.

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

The USV pays attention to the graduates and their employability in the labour market. USV 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.

Recommendations:

- *Supply students in advance with printed materials of special course.*
- *Make sure employers have significant role in developing the study programmes, as well as other activities at the USV.*
- *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.*

6., Finance, infrastructure/space and equipment

The management of the University aims at the efficient use of the funds allocated from the budget, as well as at the development of extra-budgetary sources, which should ensure the financial support for the full manifestation of the academic component, for the accomplishment of the University's mission and of the proposed goals.

The resources received from the State budget on the basis of the tuition fees approved by the Ministry of National Education for the academic year, i.e. income from student fees, sponsorship and donations, income from the performance of scientific research, design, consultancy and expert activities, allocations from the State budget for capital repairs of assets belonging to the patrimony, subsidies received for student hostels and canteens, scholarships, etc.

The budget reports and summary indicators of the execution of the income and expenditure budget are publicized on the website of the "Stefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, www.usv.ro, or are made known to the academic community through the Intranet.

The Economic Department is responsible for systematically and chronologically recording in the accounting documents related to patrimonial operations, revenues and budgetary expenditures, following the legal provisions. Taxes are different between faculties within the university.

The financial and accounting activity of the institution is transparent, with information provided to the academic community by the authorising officer at the university level.

Long term investment are reflecting in the buget. 5% of the total income came from the reserach subsidy. 80% goes paying salery every month - this is very high amount.

Every year the buget includes the sum that is dedicated to supporting publications (books, articles in journals with high impact factor).

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

USV is located in one of the central areas of Suceava city, its main campus covering almost 6 hectares.

The University has a Printing House that operates according to its regulations and is responsible for the printing of written courses and other teaching materials necessary in the educational process, as well as a Publishing House acknowledged by the National Research Council (CNCS). The University has also acquired licenses for the software used in teaching and research.

Teachers use the resources of new technologies (e-mail, WhatsApp for homework, bibliography and resources in electronic format, Facebook pages for dialogue with students) and various aids (blackboard, flipchart, video projector).

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

The academic community has access to the latest technology needed for teaching, research cloud infrastructe, cyber security, AI oriented laboratories, metaverse.

The university regularly offers cultural activities that are dedicated to the entire local community and this are hosted in the library, English garden auditorium, sports hall.

The USV has IT support for its main processes.

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

The studentds recieve laptop or tablet in the first year and they can use them durig ther study years.

Recommendation:

- *To continue regularly offers cultural activities that are dedicated to the entire local community (swimming pool, sports hall, etc).*
- *To continue the investments in infrastructure (student dormitories, teaching, research and the public reach).*

7., Internationalisation and research activity

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

The priority research directions are complemented by the detailed research plans of the faculties, which are synthesized in USV's strategic research plan.

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

USV pays special attention to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to complex themes at the frontier of multiple fields. In this regard, we highlight the development at the university level.

Additionally, the 15 doctoral fields are grouped into two multidisciplinary doctoral schools: the Doctoral School of Applied and Engineering Sciences and the Doctoral School of Socio-Human Sciences, coordinated by the Council for Doctoral Studies.

To ensure adequate funding for these RDI activities, two support services have been developed at the institutional level: the Program and Project Management Center, with the role of promoting, supporting, and developing the institutional capacity to access nationally and internationally funded programs, and the Technology Transfer and Spin-off Companies Center. Students, organized in the Entrepreneurial Society, also participate in entrepreneurial activities.

The high-level collaboration of university specialists with distinguished figures from the scientific community is underscored by the list of 22 internationally prestigious researchers who have been awarded the honorary title of Doctor Honoris Causa by USV during the evaluated period.

Additionally, USV stands out in the Romanian academic environment with prolific inventive activity, as illustrated by the ranking published by the State Office for Inventions and Trademarks (OSIM), which places USV in the first position among Romanian universities, both in terms of the number of patent applications filed during the period 2012-2022, and in terms of the number of patents granted during this period.

The USV now hosts unique national laboratories or those that rank among the top laboratories in Romania based on infrastructure characteristics.

The research activities of university faculty and researchers are supported by auxiliary staff in research and development and by functional staff with specific responsibilities.

Overall, the USV 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.).*
- *Consider the possibility of encouraging more PhD students for outcoming mobility (research and study stays).*
- *Contract teachers from other universities to give online courses at USV.*

- *Continue efforts to direct the results of scientific research towards publications and other results with national and international relevance.*

8., Quality management

The organizational structure responsible for quality assurance is the Quality Evaluation and Assurance Commission (CEAC), led by a coordinator who collaborates with similar commissions of the faculties. The development of regulations, procedures, and other documents specific to quality assurance is the responsibility of the CEAC at USV.

USV has adopted a Quality Code that includes the main policies and directions focused on quality assurance in the university domain.

USV's study programs comply with the ministry's nomenclature regarding the fields and study programs in force. Each study program is structured so that upon completion, students acquire the professional and transversal competencies established at the national level by the National Register of Higher Education Qualifications (RNCIS).

The students were involved to launch a new study program and employers too.

Overall, the structure and processes of quality assurance are developed on a solid base.

There are a number of evaluation activities at the USV 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.

Recommendations:

- *Make sure students are informed about what is happening with the feedback they provided on teaching activity.*
- *Regular reviews ensure that processes are aligned with current standards and best practices, preventing the proliferation of outdated or irrelevant information.*
- *Further strengthen certain internal quality arrangements (e.g. benchmarking with comparable institutions).*

Final recommendation

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

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

I recommend providing the Stefan cel Mare University (USV) with „high trust” institutional accreditation.

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