

# “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati External Institutional Evaluation Report 2018

## **Introduction**

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for institutional evaluation of “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati (DJUG). Prior to the site visit I studied the English version of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) of DJUG. During the visit, which took place at the premises of DJUG in Galati on 12-14 December 2018, I could enhance the information I had received about DJUG and its operation.

The site visit started with an official meeting with DJUG’s leading representatives, namely Professor Iulian Gabriel Birsan, rector of DJUG, and his team of DJUG’s top leaders. This was followed by an extensive tour of the premises of DJUG, its numerous buildings, faculties and departments, the library and other facilities. To get a more complete picture about the facilities during my stay at DJUG, I also visited several student dormitories located off the main campus, the main student canteen and some other DJUG-related premises in Galati.

A series of individual meetings as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions (functions) at DJUG and beyond followed during the site visit. I have met representatives of DJUG executive management (all over the structure: university, faculties, departments and other units), the president of DJUG’s Senate, representatives of DJUG’s Quality Assurance Department and International Relations Department, representatives of the Library and DJUG’s University Press, Student Career Centre staff, leading student association representatives (Student League), groups of students of all three levels, alumni, employers, and some other people. I had a chance to study materials related to leadership, management and governance, study provision, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and other aspects of DJUG’s operation.

I would like to express my gratefulness to Ms Daniela-Mihaela Ispas, the ARACIS officer, for her highly helpful support throughout the evaluation process. Also, I benefited from the collegial approach of the whole group of evaluators led by Prof. Ioan Lascar. I would like to thank Assoc. Professor Stefan Balta, the vice-rector of DJUG, for the organizational support of our work on the spot. And, last but not least, I want to thank Ms Alina-Daniela Capat for her interpreting during different meetings. All this was very helpful.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned, herewith I submit my report on DJUG’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 issues evaluated. My evaluation, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration, should be understood as a collegial attempt to provide DJUG and ARACIS with opinions aiming to contribute to possible improvements at DJUG and quality assurance of higher education of Romania.

## **Mission statement**

DJUG is a well-established university in the context of Romanian higher education and a leading university in the South-Eastern part of Romania.

Its mission is clearly formulated, elaborated, ambitious and acceptable. Also, it is well balanced with the focus on three areas: education, research/development and broader social role of DJUG.

The mission aims at “Initial and continuous education — through undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for self-development and career orientation, in an attempt to meet the demands of social and economic environments; Research, development, innovation and technology transfer — through individual and collective creativity in science, engineering, economics, arts, letters, sciences, humanities, medicine, legal sciences, providing sports performance and physical development, and the dissemination of results.“ Also, „the University assumes the role of cultural and civic center meant to contribute to the formation and dissemination of cultural values, to promote pluralism of options and the development of political and civic culture. The University also assumes the role of scientific and technological creation pole, to support all economic, educational and social entities in the region.“ (SAR, p. 9)

The set of objectives follows in DJUG documentation, mainly with focus on teaching and research/development activities (SAR, pp. 9-10). The strategic plan for 2016-2020 correlates with this mission and objectives.

In my view, these DJUG documents are complementary and constitute a solid fundament on which DJUG’s activities can be built and further developed.

### **Academic freedom**

In the SAR, academic freedom is stated as the first item in the list of values on which the mission of DJUG is based.

DJUG declares to share the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education (1988) as well as the Magna Charta of European Universities (1988). Also, DJUG declares to follow the aims and values of the European Universities Association, the International Universities Association as well as the Bologna Declaration (1999).

The issues of academic ethics are dealt with by the Ethics Committee, governed by the DJUG Senate.

The bodies of the university seem to be in agreement with legislation and provide the faculties with respective academic freedom.

### **Academic programmes and student management**

DJUG offers a relatively large variety of study programmes. Most of them are, obviously, in Romanian language, yet there are programmes in English and French in the university’s portfolio as well. The programmes cover the whole range of levels from bachelor’s and master’s to PhD (PhD programmes being organized in connection to doctoral schools in 14 domains). Foreign applicants for programmes in Romanian are offered a one-year preparatory course in order to master the language. Also, DJUG offers programmes within so-called University of 3rd Age (in SAR, it is called University for Senior Citizens; p. 30).

The academic programmes are in correspondence with DJUG’s mission statement as well as with international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum seem to be

appropriate for the academic degrees awarded. The programmes are continuously updated and they mostly correspond with current needs, as it was, for instance, expressed out in principle during the stakeholder meeting.

The admission procedures are clear and in line with legislation. The same can be said about the assessment of student results, both during study and in final exams. Mechanisms enabling students to evaluate the quality of study programmes are in place and, as the data suggest, students are mostly positive in their assessment.

It is to be appreciated that DJUG makes efforts to shift towards student-centered learning methods. In-service activities for the staff have been organized to promote this move. Efforts to work with SEN students can be seen as well.

The ECTS are calculated properly and students' workload seems to be manageable. Although the curriculum contains a relatively high number of direct teaching hours per week, there is apparently still enough scope for independent study, analysis and reflection.

Typically, two forms of study are applied: full-time and part-time (distant learning). Like in many other higher education institutions in Romania and other countries, a significant number of students (even those in full-time form of study) try to combine study and work. This widely spread phenomenon generates some valuable opportunities (especially if work is directly related to the field of study, which, though, is not always the case). However, this can also mean challenges to deal with (e.g. the question of priorities, proportions and scheduling).

A significant feature of most programmes is internships, which, in positive cases, seem to be the result of successful cooperation between DJUG, its faculties and departments, and the labour market. During the discussion with representatives of employers, the need to emphasize students' soft skill development was voiced out several times.

During their studies, students can obtain support from the Centre for Student Counselling and Career Orientation on the university level. There are also some units of this kind at the level of faculties.

Another form of support is scholarships to students, both Romanian students (based on study performance mainly) and international (sponsored by Romanian government). Student accommodation in dormitories is also provided.

In general, students are fairly well represented in the DJUG Senate having their own chamber. The Senate is established at the level of the university but proportionate representation of students from all faculties is guaranteed.

In some extent, the student body is also organized in DJUG student organizations. The largest organization is called Student League; it operates at the level of university but has platforms at the level of faculties as well. Represented in the Academic Council, the Student League unites approximately 1,200 bachelor and master students. It has its own office at DJUG and a seat in the student chamber of the DJUG Senate. According to the Chair of the Student League, social scholarships and the price of accommodation in dormitories are some of the current issues they deal with. The Student League does not focus specifically on working with foreign students at DJUG.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Continue the efforts to move towards student-centered methods and evaluate this effort with

strict focus on the essence of this approach.

- Continue creating opportunities to link teaching and research on the master level.
- Consider possibilities to more explicitly involve foreign students in student management processes.
- Continue developing opportunities for students with special educational needs to follow studies on a regular basis.
- Consider possibilities to regularly involve employers' voice in the development of study programmes.

## **Research**

As already indicated, research plays an important role at DJUG.

Attention is paid to traditional as well as new fields of research, to local, regional and national priorities. There is also a tendency to make research recognized internationally. The ambition of DJUG is to be strong in both fundamental and applied research. Interdisciplinarity in research is another issue DJUG deals with, recently with the help of ReForm, an integrated research platform.

A significant amount of research activities are conducted. The Research Development Innovation Strategy of DJUG for the period of 2016-2020 is relatively complex, sufficiently ambitious and covering the main areas of research at the university. Four strategic purposes are emphasized explicitly: (1) infrastructure development, (2) human resources performance and evaluation, (3) affirmation at regional, national and international levels, and (4) innovation capacity development (competitiveness and excellence). The operational objectives and strategies correlate with these purposes.

Research is primarily managed by the Council for Scientific Research and the Department of Research, Development and Innovation at DJUG. Research activities are carried out by research units; a total of 31 research units are organized at DJUG, most of them (19) in Engineering Science, which seems to play a dominant role in research at DJUG.

More than twenty journals are published by the university, several of which are prestigiously databased. Also, the university press publishes a number of texts by the staff. These publications are presented rather notelessly in the English version of DJUG webpage.

DJUG has elaborated procedures of evaluation and support for excellent research results. Also, participation of academics at conferences and other academic/scientific platforms is supported. DJUG itself organizes numerous scientific conferences, both national and international, on a regular basis.

DJUG's academic staff has been successful in various granting schemes as shown in Fig. 13 (SAR, p. 36) and yet it seems desirable to make efforts and increase prospective success in this respect. More success in external granting schemes, especially international, seems to be a challenge for some scientific fields in the university's portfolio. An internal granting scheme for research performed by young researchers has been launched at DJUG in 2017.

It seems that there is a lively research cooperation with businesses and some other stakeholders, which is a promising way of making use of the potential of applied research at DJUG.

PhD studies are developed clearly as research-driven, which is a positive direction. At the beginning of 2017/2018 there were three "pluridisciplinary schools" (combining doctoral co-ordinators from

all DJUG faculties: Doctoral Schools of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering; Doctoral School of Fundamental and Engineering Sciences; and Doctoral School of Socio-Humanities). This might serve as a solid precondition for the linkage of specific research projects of doctoral students with current research directions at DJUG. At the same time, it should be mentioned that supervisor training is not performed in a very systematic way at DJUG at the moment.

*Recommendations:*

- Reconsider ways of working with master and, especially, doctoral thesis supervisors (by emphasizing their appropriate training).
- Consider possibilities to support interdisciplinary research by effective internal granting schemes.
- Consider options of support for specific groups of academics (e.g. junior staff) in their effort to successfully apply for external research grants.
- Continue promoting DJUG's journals so that more of them can meet the requirements for highly respected international databases.
- Improve the presentation of research projects and scientific journals/academic publications in the English version of DJUG's webpage.

### **International cooperation**

Besides Romania, DJUG operates units in Moldova, Ukraine and Italy and, at the same time, strives to work on developing numerous and relatively rich international relations in teaching, research as well as development. It can be said that internationalization is a relatively strong and, in recent years, well developing aspect of DJUG's operation.

Internationalization is supported by the Department of International Relations, which was established for this specific purpose, and rising figures can be seen in almost every scheme of student exchange and academic/non-academic staff exchange with relevant institutions abroad. About 70 bilateral co-operation schemes between DJUG and other HE institutions from different European countries and 66 agreements with HE institutions from countries beyond Europe are in force.

As mentioned above, DJUG provides study programmes in English or French, which is a good basis for work with incoming students at different levels including doctoral studies. Specific attention is paid to students from Moldova, who are treated in a very friendly regime. Yet during discussions with students it turned out that, like at many other universities in Romania and abroad, quite many students hesitate as for whether they should participate or not in student exchange. This phenomenon seems to be a problem that is, apparently, caused by a complex set of reasons.

Besides exchange of students and staff, there is an increasing tendency to use opportunities for foreign stays purposed for practical activities under the umbrella of Erasmus+, which is clearly a positive trend.

As to internationalization in research, potential for further development can be seen in some fields and a combination of strict requirements and effective support seems to be desirable.

Overall, internationalization seems to be a dynamic and positive feature of DJUG and recent development trends should continue. The English version of the DJUG website is, in principle, supportive.

### *Recommendations:*

- Consider possibilities to increase DJUG student participation in student exchanges (e.g. by using scholarship incentives and flexible individualized study programmes).
- Continue developing study opportunities for incoming Erasmus students.

### **Staff**

There is a significant number of highly qualified staff in the positions of professors and associate professors at DJUG. Some of them have excellent experience and results in multiple relevant spheres. Also, there is a significant number of younger generation of academics who back them up. Besides, a certain number of international staff members regularly come to teach/lecture at DJUG for limited periods (individual lectures or block teaching), mostly on the basis of exchange agreements.

Available teaching/academic positions are publicly announced.

Professional development takes place, which in formal terms relates mainly to junior academics and their pedagogical training.

Students and alumni were positive about the staff and their quality.

Training in research methodology, in general, shows potential for further development in some fields/units; the same can be said about leadership training for staff in leadership positions at various levels, especially those recently appointed.

### *Recommendation:*

- Consider possibilities to provide staff with more systematic opportunities for training in research methodology skills and leadership training for leaders at various levels.

### **Organization and management**

DJUG is a well-established university. It consists of 14 faculties with different fields in focus. It is predominantly located in Galati, and yet there are university units in Braila and abroad (Italy, Moldova and Ukraine) belonging to DJUG. This is a highly demanding situation in terms of organization and management.

Management and administration of DJUG are well developed both vertically and horizontally as well as in other directions across the university. Specific levels of faculties and departments seem to be built and interconnected in a logical manner.

Besides faculties, several supportive centers focused on specific aspects/areas of DJUG functioning are in operation. They promote efficient functioning of DJUG.

Overall, the organization and management of DJUG is featured by a relatively strong center (Rectorate, Senate) where resources and decision-making powers are concentrated. Faculties and their leaders are expected to communicate with the center about the needs they have and the resources they require to satisfy them. It is well known that such a centralized model, including

centralized budget, has certain advantages but also limitations and risks.

## **Finance and infrastructure / Space and equipment**

The budget of DJUG consists of several resources and, in general, the income of the university has been gradually increasing in recent years. This is mainly the case of the “Base financing CI+CC” while income from research varies largely, year by year. In 2017 it represented a minor proportion of the overall budget only. DJUG’s own-generated income seems to be relatively constant (at about 12 % of the total budget).

DJUG has a number of buildings at its disposal and there are ambitious plans to buy more facilities. The buildings I could see were well equipped and can serve sufficiently for learning/teaching purposes, research and other relevant activities.

The library also provides appropriate services for students and the staff. It is important to add that besides offering a large number of professional literature the library provides access to relevant international databases.

Some dormitories/guest houses have been recently reconstructed and seem to fit their purpose well. During the group discussion it turned out that students are quite satisfied with the quality of dormitories. DJUG managers presented plans to continue reconstructing some of the buildings in the near future.

Canteens are also part of the facilities, providing services in good quality as we could experience during our site visit.

We did not have a chance to see facilities outside Galati during the site visit

The information system at DJUG supports the processes of administration and learning/teaching. Wi-Fi connection is available all over the main premises of DJUG.

Overall, the English version of the DJUG website is of good quality, although some sub-sections are still “in progress”. The English versions of the websites of some faculties were not available at the time of the site visit.

It needs to be acknowledged that the DJUG management invests important finance in the development of the facilities.

### *Recommendations:*

- Continue making buildings accessible to students with special educational needs.
- Make sure that the English versions of each faculty’s website is available in appropriate quality.

## **Quality management**

The structure and processes of quality assurance are well developed at DJUG. The Quality Council is the main body focusing on quality assurance; it is led by the rector and coordinated by the vice-rector in charge of quality assurance. Apart from University Committee for Quality Evaluation and Assurance, there are similar committees on the level of faculties, involving every study programme

and research center.

As for focus, the quality assurance system is predominantly aimed at teaching activities, research and management activities and relations with students. The main areas of DJUG operation are therefore covered in a relatively comprehensive way.

Policies and strategies for quality assurance seem to include management at all of the main levels. They formulate clearly the status and standards of each entity involved in quality assurance.

The system of evaluation at DJUG is presented explicitly as of periodic nature.

As for student evaluation, DJUG has all necessary regulations and rules regarding student examination and grading. Examination is also an integral part of the design of teaching and learning activities within courses/study programmes.

Evaluation of staff performance includes peer evaluation, evaluation by students and evaluation by university management.

Altogether, this creates a relatively complex set of evaluation activities that seem to be effectively dealing with quality assurance in major processes at DJUG.

*Recommendations:*

- Consider possibilities to work with the results of students' evaluation as part of the dialogue with the student body at DJUG.
- Consider possibilities to evaluate non-academic staff.

### **Final recommendation**

**I recommend to provide DJUG with institutional accreditation with the rating High Confidence.**

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