



Spiru Haret report, Malcolm Cook

Introduction and Background

The context of this evaluation is important, especially so perhaps for the person coming from outside Romania, who is not fully aware of the background, the previous tension that has existed between this University and Aracis, and the unbelievably massive expansion in student numbers by distance learning until the ministry intervened and this was halted. The starting point of the visit was the self-evaluation document. None of what I have mentioned above was explicit and the text itself was disappointing in that it was totally descriptive and contained no elements of true self-evaluation. During the visit I was told by different people that the University had been unfairly treated, that it was a good university misunderstood, picked on because it was private and competitive, that the EUA had failed to complete an evaluation for no good reason. And so on. That was the context.

A good university will recognize where and how improvements can be made. The Spiru Haret document reads like a defensive document, one that is trying to tell the world it is good, excellent even. The reality may be different, and judging from the many critical web sites, it looks as if there is a good deal of remedial action required. The University seems to be unaware of the reputation that it has as a 'degree mill' and even in 2008 was talking about its good image and reputation. Clearly great challenges lie ahead if the University is going to repair its reputation and become recognized as a valid and worthy institution of higher education. It is always difficult for a private university to position itself, as there will be suspicion from authority and from those working in the public sector. If a University is not able, itself, to identify strengths and weaknesses, the education of the student is at risk.

The tone of the visit was overshadowed by these difficulties that are known by others but which, for the international expert, needed elucidation. This is a university that underwent rapid and dangerous expansion without, perhaps, the infrastructure to support it. The meetings with Alumni and Employers were, as is so often the case, of little real use in the evaluation – they were all positive about the University, some employers felt that there could be more practical work undertaken to prepare students for the workplace. A constant discussion point was the method of assessment, with what seemed, to me, if true, an inappropriate use of multiple choice questions for work requiring argumentation. Born, no doubt, as a consequence of the rapid increase in distance learning students, this would need to be revised as soon as possible if the University were to maintain any credibility with the outside world. I formed the view that students deserve much better than this and Spiru Haret degrees would be worth nothing if this were not remedied. I therefore undertook to scrutinize the assessment procedures during my visit, looking at examination questions, the use of Blackboard, talking to students and to staff, seeing the particular facilities. More details follow below.

The visit was centred on the headquarters building in the middle of Bucharest. Formerly a bank building, pleasantly situated and convenient for staff and students, this building does not feel like a university. It is tired in many areas – carpets on stairs are worn and dirty and some of the rooms badly need decoration. Other, more formal rooms, appear like showpieces but one wonders how useful they actually are, with their hierarchical geography. Students indeed commented on the lack of facilities in some of the smaller teaching rooms, where there are no IT facilities, no projection facilities so no possibilities of, for example, Powerpoint presentations.

I also had the opportunity to visit a brand new building, which was purpose-built for physical education and sport and for the performance arts. The building is superb with state of the art facilities, an excellent learning environment. It is as good as anything I have seen anywhere. Next to it is an older building, which houses television studios and a major auditorium. This would be the envy of many universities. The TV studios are, again, superb, and TV serves to further the message of the university, both in terms of culture and more basic education.

Later on the same day I was able to see the outdoor sports fields. The university is certainly well served in this domain.

On another day I was shown the facilities in the building where economics and marketing are taught. This is another excellent building, new, light, a pleasant working environment and with good resources. It was here that I saw one of the rooms used for examinations and was able to scrutinize the security measures in place. They seem faultless, especially if, as I was told, student ID cards are checked on entry.

I was shown the University's publishing operation – this is a well-resourced unit that is equipped to the highest international standards and has huge potential capacity.

I was also shown one of the university's servers that is maintained and serviced by Blackboard; and later on the same day I was shown a presentation of Blackboard by a teacher. It looks to be first class. Used wisely and with staff investment in terms of time, this is a learning resource of great potential. The one hesitation I had was that I was told by other members of the ARACIS team that students seem to do a lot of assessments online. I asked myself whether this was a suitable way of testing students? I considered some examples of student assessment and formed the opinion that in many cases online assessment is totally appropriate. But there should be strict limits about the amount of such assessment that is allowed in each programme and a defined University policy on the use of Blackboard for assessment purposes. I was, as I have said earlier, reassured to learn that students need to prove their identity by ID card before being allowed to enter the examination halls. I recognize of course that other assessment methods also exist in the university, and rightly so. There are websites that criticize assessment methods in this university and there is even evidence that Spuru Haret degrees are not always accepted as an equivalent in one country. What may be appropriate and suitable for a large distance-learning



environment is obviously not suitable for a university, which offers face-to-face teaching and where the nature of the courses requires narrative answers and argumentation. Students need to be present to take part in class discussion, to learn communication skills and to learn how to work in teams. Distance-learning courses do of course prepare other skills and there are specialist colleges that do it very well. On closer inspection it became apparent that assessment now includes a number of different assessment practices, some of which might, correctly, include online assessment. The University should consider how it can find ways of reassuring the outside world about the security and safety of its assessment practices and how it can show the outside world that its standards are appropriate for the award of a degree. In my experience, the security of the assessment procedures that I saw are comparable to those of any serious university. However, here and elsewhere in Romania, there appears to be no external scrutiny of standards of examination performance nor the suitability of different forms of assessment. This is particularly the case for Spiru Haret whose reputation is poor and which needs, as a matter of urgency, to provide guarantees for the outside world. But it may also be an issue for Romanian universities more generally. External supervision of assessment practices could provide some guarantees; bringing in specialists from other universities to act as guarantors of the assessment procedures may provide a solution; the university might also want to make it clear and public that online assessment provides only a small and minor element of the overall assessment, with a maximum being allowed for each programme.

Research and Research Strategy

A newly appointed vice-rector is now leading the research strategy of the University. The largest grouping in the University is that of social scientists and there must surely be some potential here to develop research capacity. The new plan is to develop 5 domains of research, to monitor research activity and to encourage research production. The University is keen to increase its international profile so it is beginning to organize large academic conferences. This is all useful activity but it will not, in itself, allow the University to make a step change. At the moment it is not a significant research institution – it has perhaps been too keen to develop a large teaching potential, willing to increase its student numbers, which are of course its sole source of income. Research is expensive but it should feed into teaching so that students benefit from the research activity of their staff. The question about research activity is not difficult to resolve: does the university have staff who have been appointed because of their research potential and their particular strengths? Does the University have the willingness to give staff time to do research – there is a contractual requirement of 25% of time devoted to research – but is this enough for a top class researcher? Is there finance available to develop new ideas, to bring in major figures? Are staff involved in discussing how the university might evolve? What is the university doing to encourage interdisciplinary research? How are the staff in the remote campuses being monitored and encouraged? Are they also research units or simply teaching factories? International research is competitive and there is currently a huge gap between the capacity of this university and the best institutions. It will take time to change the nature of the



institution, but the institution itself has first to agree that this is a step it wants to take. Having an enthusiastic and hard-working champion at the top is a good first step – but research teams will need to be developed, particular high class journals targeted, funding will need to be directed to research development, with perhaps a pump-priming fund to encourage bright new ideas. To change the nature of an institution like this one, which is working to repair a damaged reputation, which is therefore not going to find it easy to bring in the very top researchers unless it can tempt them financially, is going to take time and effort. The University will need to develop, at least, a five-year plan with particular targets identified year on year. It is clear that there is a will here – but is this an institutional view or just the view of an enthusiastic champion? The University might want to ask to visit major research institutions overseas to see how they manage research and maintain momentum. There are many good examples to follow, including private institutions, but there is a risk that an institution like this is too insular, too self-defensive to develop an expansive research vision. It should aim in the first instance to have research excellence in a small number of precise areas, rather than spread its energies too widely. The University might want to create a research office that is both inward and outward facing – staffed by professional administrators who will identify research funding, assist with applications, maintain and manage a good database of activity. Staff will need to be regularly appraised by top researchers as they seek to make progress in their research ambitions. But the essential question, and the starting point for any discussion, is whether the staff in place are, or have the potential to be, top researchers. If not, change will be impossible and it would be unwise to attempt it. It's better to be a high-class and respected teaching institution than a second rate research university with no potential to develop and an unrealistic ambition.

A meeting with younger staff highlighted a number of problems that the University will want to take into account: staff cannot afford, on their salaries, to go to major overseas conferences – there should therefore, perhaps, be a centrally-managed research fund which would be open to competition; staff have little time for dedicated research – the University might well consider the provision of sabbatical leave based on the presentation of an excellent research project. Young colleagues should be encouraged to run a research seminar series where they can give papers to each other in a supportive environment and share ideas. Every young scholar should be given a research mentor who will read and comment on the younger person's writing before submission to a journal. The University should consider not the quantity of publications that are published but the impact of those that are – so that publishing in a major journal is seen as far more important than spreading minor research papers more widely.

Another issue is, I am told, the requirement to publish teaching texts; this should not be a requirement as it will lead to massive national duplication and loss of research energy and activity. It would seem that this is a national issue and not a local one. Furthermore, in a University that has made significant financial investment in Blackboard as a virtual learning environment, it makes little sense to produce hard copies in paper format.



Quality assurance

The University claims that it follows the European Standards and Guidelines and recent national legislation. There is a Quality Office which produces the manual of quality assurance and a Senate Commission which ensures that policies are put into practice. Every Faculty, I was told, has a Quality Assurance Commission. These commissions consider student evaluations of teaching which appear to be widespread if not universal. The Quality Office looks not just at the quality of teaching and learning opportunities but more generally at quality across the institution. What is lacking in these processes is any sense of externality – who looks at the University other than the University itself? Faculties report to Senate and Senate analyses the reports – but all this is an internal process. What happens next? I was shown an example of a teaching evaluation questionnaire with a 5-point scale of appreciation. This looked fine. It would certainly identify any teachers who were not performing well but the University seems to have no policy of enhancement – how does good teaching and good process get spread across the University to other faculties? How does this work with the remote faculties? There seems to be a good system of student representation and students readily identified the process of class representatives who would be responsible for raising any issues of concern.

Student voices and learning resources

Students with whom I met, and who were not briefed about my visit, were open and frank. They were lively and enthusiastic and had excellent English language skills. They seemed content with their experience and spoke highly of the approachability of staff and the warmth with which they were treated. In my experience, this is quite typical of students in a private institution. They were clearly concerned about the reputation of the University as their degrees would carry its name. The groups with whom I met had no experience of student exchanges or mobility, but one was planning an exchange in the future. Students in architecture were concerned that their portfolios were not returned to them but were destroyed, apparently to avoid plagiarism in the future. This seems wasteful and punitive. They seemed to have had no formal or credited experience of industrial placement or fieldwork, which is surprising given the nature of their studies. Both groups of students said that they were expected to attend classes and that a threshold figure of 80% applied. They spoke highly of the Blackboard VLE as a learning platform and appreciated the ways it was being used by staff.

I visited the library of the faculty of letters and of architecture. While there is good access to electronic resources the library holdings seemed, to me at least, to be pitifully small. There is no direct student access to the holdings, books are ordered via the online catalogue. This is clearly not a research library, perhaps not even a reasonable teaching library, but there are other good libraries in the city so this may not be important.

International Relations



Like so many universities, Spiru Haret is enthusiastic about its international relations policy and keen to present a positive image of what it does. It is a member of various networks and representatives from the University have attended various European conferences. While there are many cooperation agreements the tangible benefits for the University are not that apparent. This is a young institution with a reputation that has tarnished its image. It will not be easy to attract major partners. Much remains to be done. Many potential partners would do a prior analysis before signing an agreement. If they look at information on the WEB they will be wary of any engagement. Many articles shred the University's image. I cannot comment on the truth or otherwise of these articles but there is no doubt that they are damaging, whether they are true or false. The University has 45 Erasmus agreements with European universities but the level of actual student exchanges is poor. Just 13 students left Romania in 2011 and only 4 members of the teaching staff. This is a figure that is even lower than that of 2010 when only 21 students were mobile. There are many reasons for these low figures, not least of which is the present economic situation in Romania. But there is clearly a problem here. Here, and elsewhere in the University, we find academics running what is in effect an administrative office – this is costly in terms of time, teaching potential and research expertise. It is also apparent that this office has much in common with the research office and the communications office – would it not make sense to have some administrators working together to free up academics for their proper job? A private University has freedoms that public universities do not.

While it is evident that there is much good will and enthusiasm for international activity the major element of the mission statement is to 'initiate and develop contacts with universities all over the world'. One has to ask why – for what purpose? To create research contacts, to develop teaching initiatives, to give the University an international flavour? The strategy should be refined and discussed at a senior level and a strategy with targets should be developed. This may not involve creating more links but working with those that exist in order better to spread the reputation of the University. What is the ambition of the University – can a particular international strategy lead it in the right direction?

This is not, at the moment, an international university – its research reputation is not high and it attracts very few staff from outside the country. The University will need to consider using its resources to get high flying academics to spend time in the institution and also to develop a research strategy to improve the quality of its research, perhaps concentrate on certain key areas, publish in the best international journals and get its top staff giving lectures at major conferences where they will be able to network with researchers from other institutions and other countries, and they will put Spiru Haret on the map.

Admissions

Student numbers in the various programmes are regulated by the Ministry - this might appear surprising given that the University is a private one and receives no direct income from the state. Students apply directly to the University and in some disciplines a particular aptitude test might be appropriate. The question



one would always ask in this respect is whether the image of the University as it presents itself is accurate – is the public information reliable since this will be an important factor in student choice. Most private Universities give a rosy, generous picture of themselves and this one is no exception. Serious questions remain, it would seem, about the value and reputation of a degree from Spiru Haret. The students in Bucharest and Romania may well know the background – students applying from overseas will not, and that represents a risk. If the poor reputation is no longer true, the University will need to launch a major campaign to improve its public image and to show that it is a serious institution that can be trusted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This is the third private university I have visited in Romania and on every occasion I have had concerns about the security of standards. How can graduates of these institutions know that their diplomas will be seen as equivalent to those of other universities in Europe? Like all private institutions, there is a sense of being misunderstood, a belief that exterior agencies will ask unfair questions about its role and mission, its procedures and strategies. It is clear that a number of the prejudices that exist about this university are unfair – there some good teachers here and the students are content. The facilities in some of the buildings are superb. I got the sense that the University was taking seriously criticisms about its assessment practices. Course descriptions I saw show that students are assessed in a number of ways that are appropriate to the discipline. The examination questions I saw, a variety of online and more traditional assessments, seemed appropriate. The balance between the two is important and it is clearly essential that the University cannot allow students to be assessed only by an online multiple-choice examination which even the uninitiated might pass without study or attendance. It was not apparent that the university had a standard assessment strategy with minimum and maximum limits imposed in the various manners – so, for example, it might be suggested that no programme can be assessed online in a way that will generate more than 10% of the total marks for the degree. There is a perception that students can get degrees without attending classes. This is not the case for the students whom I saw during the visit, who said that they were expected to attend 80% of the classes. There is a perception that the examination hall is not a secure space for assessment. As mentioned previously, I was told that students had to present personal ID cards at entry and also that they could be observed online during the examination, as well as being supervised by staff present in the hall. I saw the system at work and it is excellent and secure. This, to me, seems to me, good. A private university is, naturally, a business and it will need, just like any business, to take account of its image and its reputation. It is also important for the country itself that no single university undermines the reputation of its national education. A good university will listen to criticisms made of it and work to address them. It will follow national legislation even when it might not agree with it, simply because the future of their students depends on compliance. It will work constantly to improve the student experience, show the world that its standards are secure and, if there is time and will, seek to have research excellence in some defined and agreed areas.

