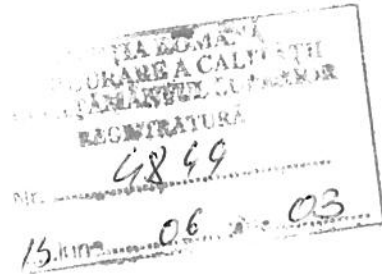


THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2013



Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 15 May and Friday 17 May 2013. In this process as a foreign expert evaluator I was responsible for establishing an overview of ASE focusing on the main points of continuous improvement of quality and future development aspects with outlining the main dimensions of present and future challenges of the university. Before the three day long visit I received the self-evaluation report of ASE and the guidelines of external institutional evaluation from ARACIS. During my stay in Bucharest with the help of the colleagues of the university I had the possibility to insight all the documentations and annexes of the evaluation process and to collect information about the operation of the ASE. My report is roughly following the structure of the self evaluation report of the institution.

Background

The ASE was founded as an academic institution by Royal Decree on 6 April 1913, under the name of Academy of High Commercial and Industrial Studies. The Bucharest University of Economic Studies with its 100 year old tradition has a significant role in Romania. This 100 year old story through time, changing socio-economic systems, restructuring processes and transformations is a permanent evolution of educational programs related to the economic issues that continuously meet the needs of the students and later, from the 1990s with the market economy requirements. As a leader university in Romanian higher education on economic field this institution always has

been attractive for those who wanted to get knowledge, skills and competencies on economic and economic related fields at a high standards. Well-known personalities of Romanian economy and culture were the members of the institution teaching staff from the beginning by providing high-quality educational services for the students of the institution.

There are several institutions, faculties offering different kinds of educational programs on the field of economic studies, law and public administration in the country but the tradition, the experience, the prestige and the competences of ASE show the importance of the institution in the internal and international environment and also support and develop scientific research activities both national and international level. On the whole the institution meets the cultural, social and economic needs of the community.

According to the self-evaluation report of the ASE the strategic objectives focusing on the maintenance of the present favorable position and provide future development with *promoting complex systems and mechanisms for quality assurance in education, improving institutional quality and management, ensuring a high quality level in compliance with European requirements, promoting European and international cooperation in multiple directions and developing and improving professional competences in the economic, legal and public administration field.* The present state of the university shows that the institution stands a good chance to consolidate its position as leader in Romanian higher education and scientific research in the fields of economics, law and public administration and it is on the right track to be considered one of the most prestigious universities in Central-Eastern Europe.

Leadership, managerial structures

According to the information and written documents the academic and the administrative leadership of ASE have the appropriate competencies to do their work correctly. The managerial structures of the eleven faculties of the university, the departments, centers and other organizational units of the institution have a transparent, logical structure and they are suited for the correct management of the organization. The operation of the

institution rely on a system of regulations, procedures and tools covering the whole set of university life parallel with the permanent evaluation of the different types of programs, the teaching staff and the other personnel of the university.

The management of the ASE is in charge with updating and implementing quality-related policies and objectives and ensuring QMS compliance with the reference standards. The Rector of the ASE is responsible for the quality of provided education, and the operative management is ensured by the Vice-Rector in charge with Quality Assurance. On the whole, from the beginning the university has the mission of carrying on specific higher education activities in economic and economic related fields, having the purpose of training highly-skilled specialists, developing and improving professional competences in the economic, legal and public administration field, improving constantly the education process and scientific research in the economic, legal and public administration fields, in permanent cooperation with similar institutions, as well as with institutions from the national, European and international business environment, parallel preparing active citizens for living in a democratic society.

Educational programs, teaching staff

The university has 11 faculties and offering educational programs at BA, MA and doctoral level. Through its faculties and the Distance Learning Center, the ASE also organizes study programs for distance learners in its territorial centers. Starting with 2005, the ASE has been organizing international summer school in every year (Bucharest Summer University). The university also has successful MBA programs running with cooperation of Canadian, German and UK universities.

In the 2012-2013 academic year, there were 23,754 students and course participants enrolled in all study programs and types of learning (compared to 27,826 in 2011-2012 and 34,564 in 2009-2010). According to the data of the self-evaluation report of the university, from this number 14,652 were enrolled in Bachelor's study programs (compared to 15,299 in the academic year 2011-2012 and 18,545 in 2009-2010), 8,227 in Master's programs (compared to 10,908 in the academic year 2011-2012 and 13,697

in 2009-2010), and 133 international Master programs (compared to 265 in the academic year 2011-2012 and 307 in 2009-2010), and also 742 in PhD programs (compared to 1,354 in the academic year 2011-2012 and 1,365 in 2009-2010).

It is important to remark that the number of the enrolled students of the university decreased more than 10.000 from the 2009/2010 academic year to the 2012/2013 academic year which is almost a 30% decrease. According to the data of the self-evaluation report, the most remarkable drop can be seen on the field of international master programs where this decrease is more than 50% (it is 40% at MA, and 20% at BA study programs). These changes could have several reasons like certain effects of demographic changes, decreasing interest, worsening financial background of potential students, changing role of higher education, admission fee from this year, market competition, offerings of other state universities or private institutions and even it can be a result of a new strategic orientations of the university. Lower number of students certainly could result better level of teaching with improving the quality of the educational processes and scientific research as long as the financial background is stable and the longer term financial sustainability of the institution is not in danger. These changes also could affect wide range of management activities of ASE from human resources management to reengineering of services related to the educational processes. Whatsoever is the exact reason, this could be an important sign for the leaders of the university to deal with in the near future beside the present permanently changing and sometimes not so stable financial situation.

The titular teaching staff in ASE has proper competencies, qualifications, and academic degrees which results a good level of performance in education and training processes. According to the self-evaluation report of the institution and personal field experiences the scientific potential and quality of human resources of ASE seems to be on a good level. University has now a highly qualified staff. Beyond the professional competences it is important to point out that the language skills of the staff (including not just the titular teaching staff but even the administrative and other employees) is good.

In the academic year 2012/2013, the ASE employs 1,470 people (January 2013). The number of employees also has drop in the past few years but parallel with the earlier mentioned decrease of the number of students the present number of employees is certainly able to satisfy the needs of the education programs in an appropriate level. To promote the high quality of education a part-time contract system exists in the university: in accordance with the law, relatively large number of specialists works as associate professors on part time contracts. In the academic year 2012/2013, from the total full time teaching staff in ASE, 25 professors also work at other universities. It is also important to add that the teaching staff from ASE enjoys a large national and international recognition and appreciation, which is also leading to their presence in specialized bodies and committees in the country and abroad.

Material assets

The ASE activities are conducted in its own locations represented by 38 buildings with a total surface of 169,920.94 square meters which correspond to high standards and which ensure a high quality educational process, in line with the educational plans and the number of students. The 11 faculties are operating in six main buildings owned by the ASE. Funding is provided from own revenues, from the state budget and from other sources. The capacity of the educational facilities (classrooms, auditoriums, seminar rooms, laboratories) is in accordance with the existing regulations.

The Central Library of ASE has eight reading rooms and two loaning centers, and a large and extended book collection appropriate to the disciplines from the curricula of university courses (bachelor's, master's, doctoral, postdoctoral, postgraduate). The ASE Library, with a total of 2,032 seats in reading rooms (including student hostels), provide students and trainees with monographic publications, specialized courses, periodicals and audio-visual materials covering all Romanian and foreign literature recommended by the curricula, according to the mission developed by the university as a whole and its programs of study. The ASE has its own publishing house and has 14 journals and periodicals which are published here.

The Department of Physical Education and Sports includes a sports complex opened in 1996, consisting of two rooms suited for different sports and field tennis, a gym, judo and aerobics room, a room for gymnastics and physical development and three fitness rooms. Dormitory buildings of the university have European standard conditions of accommodation offered for the students.

The equipments and installations in connection with the educational process is seems to be an important priority and supply the demands of students quite well. On the other hand besides the above mentioned priority there are certain dimensions where further investment and development is needed: for example some parts of the visited faculties are not in a very good state of repair. The present processes despite of the permanently changing financial conditions seem to be promising. On the whole the university meets the demands of European standards but it is important to continue the work to invest permanently to its physical infrastructure.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, the university is establishing funds for activity from the annual state finance, school tuition taxes, from donations and sponsorships and other incomes. According to the details and the consultations with the staff of the university the financial activities, incomes and expenses of ASE in spite of the permanently changing financial conditions and fluctuating state finance are relatively well-balanced. As it can be read in the self-evaluation report of the university, the balance of the received incomes from MECTS, in total revenue, is of 46% compared with 2008, when the university benefited from the best financing, and the budgetary financing percent was of 58% in total revenue.

I think that this could result a new strategic orientation in the next few years: instead of less secure level of state support the university has to find the ways to realize more own, extra budget incomes to maintain and finance its activities in a reasonable level and quality. Right now there are lots of signs of this change of way of thinking: there are plans to utilize the available resources and find also new directions to make extra

money. Another way to keep the present financial situation relatively stable could be to realize more income from study fees with raising the present level of fees or enrolling greater number of students for the present education programs or offering new, desirable programs which could attract more students.

According to the received information, it is important to maintain the present average number of students in the future which is 'enough' to make the system sustainable. To maintain this situation is an important challenge, as the number of students becomes lower and lower because of the demographical loop (just like everywhere in the Central Eastern European countries), and the negative effects of the financial crisis has already reached higher education. The third factor is certainly the effect of the potential competitors, universities in the neighboring cities and regions with similar education programs. If this scenario is going to happen in the near future, the decreasing number of students and decreasing incomes result that ASE would be forced to find other outside resources, extra budget incomes, or has to find new ways, education programs, which could maintain the present situation in a long term as a strategic orientation.

It is important to add that the university permanently tries to attract potential students. The good reputation of ASE attracts lot of potential students and the university also has good connections with the secondary education institutions and other private and state organizations and companies. There is also a financial assistance for students as granting of scholarships and other forms of financial supports.

Students

In the ASE in the 2012/2013 academic year are enrolled 23,754 students: 14,652 in undergraduate academic studies, 8,227 in master's studies programs, 742 in doctoral studies and 133 international master's programs. As I have remarked earlier this process can be an important sign of changes and the university certainly has to cope with this challenge in the next few years. According to the opinions of some colleagues from the university there is no need to get more students, because the present number of students is 'enough' to maintain the institution and quality of educational processes,

but on the other hand if there is a possibility for growing with keeping an appropriate level of quality of the education programs it would be worth to expand the education services and activities of the university.

There is a large number of international cooperation with European, Asian and overseas universities from 33 countries and the number of bilateral agreements exists in ASE are almost 150. The most important directions of these connections are with universities of France, Italy, Spain, Germany and Canada. The ASE is also participating in the ERASMUS program where parallel with the student mobility there is also teacher mobility in the university which usually means a one week long period to different European destinations basically with the same main directions like student mobility. In the academic year 2012/2013 the university has 116 ERASMUS bilateral agreements. Although these connections are operating quite well, it is recommended to maintain and manage these contracts permanently with European and also with non-European universities and increase the number of students and staff members taking part in mobility activities.

The ASE presents their educational offer by publishing brochures, leaflets and posters, within educational fairs, meetings with the high school students, meetings with possible foreign students (China, Jordan, Brazil, Argentina, France, etc.), national and local mass media.

In the past few years the increase of the 'spiritual' life of the academic community has become more and more important which certainly mean that the university organizes art and cultural events and programs, organizes permanent (for example in the library) and periodic contemporary art exhibitions in the halls and spaces of ASE and even there is a possibility for spiritual life: in the main building on the top floor there is an Romanian orthodox chapel.

Dormitory buildings of the university have European standard conditions of accommodation, and perfectly meet the needs of the students. The present capacities

cover 25% of the total number of students but it seems to be enough as large number of students are from Bucharest or from the surrounding areas so they basically don't need this type of assistance of accommodation.

There are also scholarships for Roma ethnic candidates and for young people of Romanian nationality from the Republic of Moldova.

The public information can be found on the ASE site, which is one of the most important parts of the communication with the external environment including correct information about the main aspects of the education process in Romanian and English language.

During my visit I had the possibility to meet with some students of ASE and I found them very open minded, energetic and intelligent. They seem to be very loyal to their university and pay a lot of attention to their studies. I have also experienced that the students I met speak very good English.

Research activities

ASE plays a very important role in scientific research, with promoting the enrichment of knowledge in different fields. The importance of research activities seems to be significant in the university and the results of these activities are apparently integrated to the educational process. In ASE, just like everywhere in the European Union member countries of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources, projects and funds become more and more important in financing the different kinds of research activities.

The ASE has established as strategic option the reconsideration of the research system to increase its international component and develop the research activity based on the use of knowledge in the social and economic environment with generating sustainable partnerships with other organizations from the academia and business network.

Scientific research is carried out through themes and projects closely connected to the institutional programs of the departments, faculties, doctoral schools and research

centres, currently being undertaken 150 projects which certainly show the importance of the university at local and international level and show a high level of visibility of the institution. It is important to point out that scientific research and project activity helps to finance researchers: according to the self-evaluation report of the university, in 2012, 64 postdoctoral scholarships were awarded through projects financed from structural funds.

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields a higher education institution has to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. In case of ASE these connections seem to be in a perfect level as national and international collaboration has been in focus from the beginning.

Research activities can be seen at institutional, individual as well as student level. The university promotes the teaching staff participation in research programs, the intense collaboration with industrial and services companies, universities and state institutions.

Conclusion

My report is based on what I have experienced; what I have seen, what I have read and have heard before and during my visit. I hope that some of my comments will help the university management in the process of permanent improvement. On the whole ASE develops its activity within a competition market including service offers for education, research and consulting and meets the individual's educational and professional training specific standards, as well as the community social and economic development standards and European standards of education and scientific research.

I recommend the high level of confidence rate for the university with emphasizing the following:

- Although the present situation, role and reputation of ASE are good, the university should pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students, etc.);
- Although the present number of students is 'enough' to maintain the institution and quality of educational processes, it would be worth to expand (again) the education services and activities of the university. The easiest way could be to (re)start and (re)develop distance learning programs which have certainly had much more importance few years ago and parallel with this it is worth to think about developing e-learning programs;
- ASE should continue to invest in the physical and human infrastructure and facilities when own resources, state support or any other funds allow;
- The maintenance of the present favourable situation and competitiveness is an important challenge and appears the key element of the sustainable future of ASE.

Finally I would like to thank to the Rector and all the University staff for the pleasant atmosphere and the support during my stay in Bucharest. At last but not least I would like to thank to ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation process in Romania.

Pécs, 05-26-2013



Iván Zádori PhD
Assistant Professor
University of Pécs
Hungary