



„DRĂGAN” EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF LUGOJ EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION REPORT 2011

Introduction

I was invited to join to the evaluation team of the institutional evaluation process of Drăgan European University of Lugoj as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The evaluation took place between Wednesday 07 December and Friday 09 December 2011. In this process as a foreign expert evaluator I was responsible for establishing an overview of the DRĂGAN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY 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 the institution. During my stay in Lugoj with the help of the colleagues of Drăgan European University I had the possibility to insight the documentations and annexes of the evaluation process and collect every useful and important information about the university. My report is roughly following the structure of the self evaluation report of the institution.

Background

Lugoj is a relatively small town with 45.000 inhabitants in Timiș County, 60 km from one of the largest Romanian cities, the county capital Timișoara. The Drăgan European University was founded here in 1992 by Professor Iosif Constantin Drăgan. The main aim of this initiative was, as it can be read in the self evaluation report of the university *„to train specialists, who by acquired skills, are able to face a market economy, integrated in the network of juridical, economical, social European cultural contacts, in this way promptly responding to a great imperative of the day”*. Earlier there was no

higher education institute in Lugoj so it was a great opportunity and chance for the town, for the local institutions, organizations, companies and of course for those who would like to continue their studies without leaving the city or the region. Although the foundation of the university was probably not a 'clear' reaction for the local demands but rather a gallant gesture of Professor Drăgan who felt responsibility for his hometown, the educational programs offered by the new university soon became very attractive and there was a great demand for the new competences. Practically, the institution managed to follow up the market needs of transition economies as in the 1990s there was a great demand for graduated laborforce with law and economic diplomas everywhere in Central-Eastern Europe.

Juridical framework, mission and objectives

In 1992 the Drăgan European University of Lugoj has been set up as a higher education and research institution with a private, non-profit character, and the university started to establish the present educational programs and specializations. Drăgan European University of Lugoj – as an institution of high education, legal person of private law and public utility, integrant part of the national system of education. From the beginning the university has the mission of carrying on specific higher education activities in the juridical and economical fields, having the purpose of training highly-skilled specialists in these fields, preparing active citizens for living in a democratic society, preserving and developing, through teaching, learning and researching a solid foundation of complex and advanced knowledge.

As a relatively young university, the main aims and priorities of the university from the beginning have been the next:

- Permanently increasing the quality of activities in order to operate Drăgan European University of Lugoj as a well operating institution at national and international level and integrate it in the European Higher Education System and to improve the European System of Transferrable Credits;

- Permanently increasing the efficiency and competitiveness of the didactic field;
- Developing scientific research;
- Developing, perfecting and diversifying the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students;
- Permanent and dynamic development and continuous modernization of educational programs, professional framework, and infrastructure.
- To involve Drăgan European University of Lugoj in projects of social, economic, cultural, regional development.

It is important to point out that Drăgan European University of Lugoj as a private institution has to cope with the challenges of a competitive higher education market, national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields and it has to offer attractive study programs which are really based on the demands of the students. We could say that the students are the key elements of these processes: besides the donations, sponsorships, grants and other researching resources they are the ones who 'produce' the own resources and make the system sustainable with their fees.

It seems that the 'answers' of Drăgan European University of Lugoj for these permanently appearing challenges are basically successful. The experiences, prestige and competences of Drăgan European University of Lugoj show the importance of the institution in the local and regional environment.

Management, organizational structures, human resources

According to the information and written documents the academic and the administrative leadership of Drăgan European University of Lugoj have the appropriate competencies to do their work correctly. The managerial structures and other organizational units of the university have a transparent, logical structure and it is 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, teaching staff and other personnel of the university.

According to the self evaluation documentation of the institution and personal field experiences the scientific potential and quality of human resources of Drăgan European University is on a good level. The teaching staff in Drăgan European University of Lugoj seems to have proper competencies, qualifications, and academic degrees which certainly results a good level of performance in education processes.

The Drăgan European University of Lugoj will make all the necessary steps in order to assure a coherent policy in the field of human resources. The tenured teaching staff in Drăgan European University of Lugoj counting 28 teachers: 4 professors, 4 senior lecturers, 15 lecturers (from whom 14 hold the scientific title of PhD, 1 being PhD researcher), 1 junior assistant, 4 assistants (holding a bachelor degree, PhD researchers or graduates of master degree programs of studies). Some teaching activities are developed by recognized specialists, from the outside of the university, which bring their important contribution to the teaching programs with their specific knowledge, field expertise and competencies.

Educational programs

The evolution of educational programs from 1992 show that the main focus of the university has remained law and economic studies although certain changes have occurred by developing, perfecting and diversifying the study programs with satisfying the demands of the labor market parallel with satisfying the demands of the students. As a result, some of the earlier offered education programs had been terminated and new education programs developed. All the present BA and MA education programs are seem to be still marketable although most of these fields are not very 'special' (except MA Criminal Investigation Management) as these programs can be found in many private and state higher education institutions in Romania.

The university has implemented the Bologna Process principles, although the third level, PhD studies are 'missing' right now from the educational programs. According to the

present situation it seems that in the near future it is not very realistic to start a PhD program with the present human resource base which is probably not a result of a failure of the institution but rather a recognition that without involving outside human and financial resources and without significant market needs it can't be correctly realized.

On the other hand, I consider as a remarkable issue the implementation of the two levels of the Bologna Process with undergraduate and Master's Study programs at Drăgan European University of Lugoj which allows the institute to connect to the European Higher Education Area. In Hungary there is also a possibility for a two-year long advanced vocational program (at ISCED level 5B) which is available on an optional basis prior to first cycle (Undergraduate/License University Studies) programs leading to advanced vocational qualifications. Such programs can count towards any ISCED 5A programs up to a maximum of 60 credit points. As I have experienced (if my information are correct) these types of vocational programs are not existed at Drăgan European University of Lugoj. Maybe in the future that would be a kind of diversification path to organize such programs which already exist in the Hungarian system. I think there is also a possibility to organize professional higher education training programs at Drăgan European University of Lugoj in the future (at ISCED level 5A) which can follow any Bachelor's or Master's degree and they involve specialization in a field of study and with a certificate at the end, but do not lead to another degree. The third diversification possibility could be to offer courses for adults that can be found in the profile of DRĂGAN European Foundation since the 1960s, and probably it would be also marketable at local and regional level in Lugoj, Romania.

Financial activity

As a nonprofit institution, the university is self financing, establishing funds for activity from the annual 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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj are well-balanced. It is important to point out that without state support Drăgan European University of Lugoj has to cover its expenses with its own incomes which

means that the most significant part is coming from student fees, and from some other outside resources, extra budget incomes. The present number of the students and the present amount of fees paid by them seems to be enough to sustain the university processes in a good level. It is important to point out that in the period of 2003-2011 the total number of the students declined from year to year although the level of total incomes remained relatively stable with certain growth in this period. It is only possible with the growth of study fees which helps to maintain the present financial situation stable.

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 which could reach (or it is possibly that it has already reached) higher education, even the private education institutions, too. The third factor is certainly the effect of the potential competitors, universities in the neighbouring 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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj 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 point out that the university permanently tries to attract potential students. It 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 support as well as other social assistance to the students. Additionally, Drăgan European University of Lugoj fees seems to be lower than the average level of fees of the competitors.

BA graduates could also continue their studies in in master programs: in 2011, at institutional level, this rate was 49%. According to the data, during the last 5 years, the

percent of graduates admitted to master programs varied on faculties, between 39 and 80%.

International visibility and collaboration

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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj these connections seem to be in order as national and international collaboration has been in focus from the beginning at Drăgan European University of Lugoj.

The research activity 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, univesities and state institutions.

The university also has 3 evaluated and recognized reviews with scientific character: Drăgan European University of Lugoj Annals. Economic Series, Modern Didactics and Studium Legis, where associated staff members could publish their new results and of course these reviews are open for other scholars at the related fields.

It is important to point out that students take part to student's scientific sessions organized by other university centres very successfully.

Drăgan European University of Lugoj has also concluded agreements and partnerships with companies, state and local govermental institutions and nonprofit orgazizations as well. These connections show that the university has a very important role in Lugoj in economical, cultural and social aspects.

The importance of research activities seems to be significant at the university and the results of these activities are apparently integrated to the educational process. In Drăgan European University of Lugoj, just like everywhere in the recently joined European countries of Central-Eastern Europe, the European resources become more and more

important in financing the different kinds of research activities. In consideration of the institution prestige, it would be important in the future to organize conferences and workshops which could be very important for the national and international visibility of the institution and beside the 'outsider' lecturers and participants it gives possibility for the students and teachers from Drăgan European University of Lugoj to present the results of their research activities.

Although the University has entered to the ERASMUS program, it is recommended to enter into more bilateral contracts with European and also with non-European universities and increase the number of students and staff members taking part in mobility activities.

Material resources

Drăgan European University of Lugoj has a good material base for education. The castle-shaped modern building of the university was built between 1992 and 1995 and designed especially for education purposes (personally, I found this initiative very amazing how Professor Dragan commemorated for the demolished and disappeared Lugoj fortification). Within its 2.292 square meters the university has a lecture hall with 450 places, 4 lecture rooms with 180 places each, 2 lecture rooms with 58 places each; 8 seminar rooms with 30 places each, 2 equipped laboratories, a criminology laboratory, and a reading room with 124 places. This material basis meets the needs of the whole educational process. The university's library has more than 26 000 books in law and economics field, as well as in other specialities related to different education programs. The university also has an access to a canteen with 24 seats and a 740 m² sports ground.

The equipments and installations in connection with the educational process seem to be an important priority and supply the demands of students quite well. The investment and development is permanent, the present processes despite of the permanently changing financial conditions seem to be promising. These investments and developments are financed through the institution's own sources. On the whole the university meets the demands of European standards but it is important to continue the work to invest

permanently to maintain its present favourable infrastructure. I think that these elements are in a good level, and meet the demands of the students.

Students, public information

The university is offering to the students, master students, didactic staff and non-didactic personnel a room for formatting, communicating and informing on the new educational technologies, a place for culture, opening, meeting and professional integration. The University is also offers a range of social, cultural and sport services for students.

The public information can be found on the Drăgan European University 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 language. Although there are certain informations in English (for example the English version of the self evaluation report of the University), it would be important to develop an English language homepage to widening the reachable quantity and quality of information.

The promotion of the image of Drăgan European University of Lugoj is done on the basis of a Marketing Plan of the institution where are presented essential elements of the promotional plan (publications in the written, audio and video mass-media, Drăgan European University website, etc.) and of the academic offer. The communication with the public, potential social partners, institutions, are a priority to the university management from the start, as well as the Open Doors Month (every year in May).

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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj 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 level of confidence rate for the university with emphasizing the following:

- I suggest developing more international links and collaborations to support local and international research activities and encourage students and staff members taking part in exchange and mobility programs.
- Drăgan European University of Lugoj should maintain and continue to invest in the infrastructure and facilities when own resources, and 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 Drăgan European University of Lugoj. Although the present situation is financially sustainable, there are certainly two basic directions for the future:
 1. The University is focusing on maintaining the present situation without any significant change and manages its resources to keep the system work which in an optimal situation meets the needs of the students, employees and external partners;
 2. The University concentrates on diversification and further development (developing new education programs, distance learning, focusing on other potential target groups, etc.), parallel with managing its resources to keep the present system work.

I would not say that the first one is good, or the second path is the correct solution, but the earlier mentioned permanent decline of the total number of students could result a decision making situation when the management of the University has to think about the future, even if there is a relatively strong foundational background behind the institution. Similar to any economic, social or environmental situations, it could be an important question to start to change the given processes without intensive negative feedbacks or the change only happens as an effect of the negative processes? Of course it is very

simply to say that the first variation is better, because there is basically no guarantee that the university would make good decisions or manage to choose correct diversification paths, but I think that in a situation where certain signals show that the future sustainability of this private institution is not that stable as it was few years ago, the management of the university has to try to cope with these challenges. I wish that Drăgan European University of Lugoj would find the right way for success and the right position in the Romanian Higher Education.

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

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