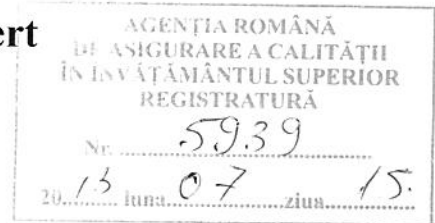


External ARACIS-Evaluation of University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi “Ion Ionescu de la Brad”

Report of Foreign Expert Prof. Stefano Grego



Introduction

I was appointed as Foreign Evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurances in Higher Education (ARACIS) and I was invited to join the evaluation team for the institutional accreditation process of the University of Agriculture Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi “ Ion Ionescu de la Brad” (USAMV IASI). The leader of the expert evaluation panel was prof. Mihai Octavian Popescu from the University “Politehnica” of Bucharest and the Coordinator was prof. Razvan Nistor from University Babes-Bolyai of Cluj-Napoca.

The visit was scheduled from 12 to 14 of June 2013 and the audit purpose was to provide information on different aspects of teaching and research at all University levels.

As external evaluator I received a “Self Evaluation Institutional Report” in English, organised by the Rector prof. Vasile Vintu and his staff. The 52 pages provided a complete picture of the USAMV IASI in all his aspects. The report has been very useful for the preparation of my visit giving a full description of the institution and its development.

The USAMV IASI is an old and well know University. The year 2012 was the 100 years anniversary of its establishment and it belongs to the national education system of Romania. The University Senate is the top decision-making body and it is democratically elected. It decides on major problems regarding the academic activities, as financing, selection and promotion of the academic and administrative staff, admission of students, development of services for the society.

The operating management is assured by the Administration Board, that includes the Rector, four Vice-Rectors, the Chief Administrative Officer of the University, the CSUD Director and the representative of students.

As foreign external evaluator I had the chance to organise my consultations, beside the official meetings planned by the leader of expert evaluation panel and by the Rector prof. Vintu.

The visit

The visit started the 12 of June with the official meeting between the expert panel and the Senate. The Rector illustrated the structure and activity of the university in the domain of training and research, reporting the same data present in the Self-Evaluation Institutional Report. During this meeting I asked to have the possibility to meet the PhD students and to visit the research laboratories.

The campus has been recently restored and it appears very pleasant. It offers many facilities besides the student accommodations such as a nice new recreation area open also to the civil population, sport facilities and a very modern library.

The recreation area has been created on a unused space and now is a meeting point for the students and also for some young family. It is not a botanical garden and the trees are very young and organised only with an esthetical and not with didactic purpose. Noteworthy is the collection of Romanian roses with some very attractive varieties.

The visit to the library has been very remarkable. The structure is well organised and has a significant number of books and journals, both in Romanian and other language. The library has access to different platforms- collections of scientific journals in full text format, and to series of databases. Students have a large availability of computer with Internet connection and they have free access. Each student has an account and the communication and information from the university are given also via web.

In addition, the UASVM-IASI has a 3D Advanced Visualisation Centre, very interesting under the possibilities in the general education profile. We had a demonstration of the large potentiality of the Centre and I am sure that in the future it will be a support for training and research.

PhD students

The reunion with PhD students was organised by Dr Radzvan Radu Rusu that has been of great help during my entire visit to the USAMV-IASI. I wish officially to thank for his dedication, high professionalism and easy human relations.

Around 35 PhD students from both agriculture and veterinary disciplines were present at the meeting. The presence of prof. dr. Volpe Vasile, Director of the doctorate school of Veterinary Medicine and prof. dr. Pop Ioan Mircea, Director of doctorate school of Agricultural Sciences were highly appreciated.

The meeting was very stimulating and highly important to understand the process of PhD development at the university and inside the different Faculties and departments. The students were all very motivated in the research that each of them was developing. This important aspect is mainly due to their involvement in the choice of the PhD thesis topic. It was evident in fact that they have been very independent in choosing the subject of the research to be developed, inside one topic. Most of the students had a period abroad to develop experiments and collect data to include in their thesis. I discovered during the talk with them that more than 50 % have been in a research institution in Italy. In general they were happy for the experiences they are doing and the development of their research. According to the financial possibility some of them presented some results in a national and international conference. As far as I could understand the general policy for a PhD student is to publish at least two papers before the end of the PhD.

The main problem raised by the PhD student was the shortage of money. After the meeting I had the possibility to visit many laboratories very well equipped, with important and advanced apparatus, but in many cases not in use. The main reason is the lack of financial support. Modern apparatus are very useful, very precise and fast in giving results but they need expensive support. In many cases it is necessary to buy expensive kits and this seems it is not always possible. As far as I could understand also the consultancies are decreasing in some fields due also to the general financial crisis.

Beside this important and key constrain the reunion with the PhD students has been very positive and I could appreciate the serious approach to the research, the curiosity and the skilful of all of them. I could also detect some concern and anxiety for their future. Many of them would like to continue their studies, may be with another experience abroad. The future of our young researchers, with a higher education diploma, is uncertain in most of the European countries and it should be discussed and solved at the European Commission level.

I was surprised to know that by law the PhD thesis have to be written in Romanian language. The students told me that generally it is prepared also an extended abstract in English. It should be considered for the future to permit the students to write their thesis in English if they want, as it is now in most European countries. This could allow a wider international circulation of the thesis and making easier to apply for post-doc position around Europe. Probably it could also facilitate the writing out of scientific papers for international journals. This is a crucial aspect due to the fact that the number of papers in international journals is very low. The potentiality is high but the research results are very often published in national journals and in Romanian. This beside the fact that all students I met had a good knowledge of English and all communications between us have been easier.

Recommendation: develop a clear policy for found rising at national and international level. I strongly suggest to strengthen the international office with the aim to participate with stronger trust to international research programmes. Internationalisation is one of the key issues to develop and support a competitive research apparatus. It should be favoured the publication of the research results, may be giving the opportunity to PhD students to write their thesis in English.

Visit to the horticulture farm

I had time to give short visit to the horticulture farm nearby the university. The structure is impressive and with many important facilities for research and teaching. The collection of fruit trees is such to cover most of the typical fruits grown in Romania. I visited also a bright new PHYTOTHRON structure, with chambers with controlled atmosphere, temperature and all aspects necessary with the aim to replicate artificially different climate conditions. It is rare structure in Europe and could be an attractive instrument for advanced research on climate change and modification of agriculture, studies on plant physiology in extreme environment, energy balance in different ecosystems. Unfortunately it is not active yet for financial difficulties.

The presence of such versatile and complex structure could be proposed to international partners for developing advance research and participating to European calls. In this way would be possible to have the financial necessary support and to propose the University as a centre of excellence in the studies on environment dynamics.

Students and stakeholders

In the afternoon the panel was invited to a discussion with student representatives of the four faculties. At the meeting were present students of the three cycles. The debate was interesting and very animate. The curricula have been changed according to the Bologna agreement. During the debate students complained because to their view the attention to practical work is not sufficient and they would like to have more time for applied classes. In addition, it seems that some course programme did not change from five year to four year determining an overload of subjects to be studied in shorter time. The number of bilateral agreements with the European universities allows students to have an experience inside the Erasmus Programme. The actual number of students studying abroad is not available and the request during the meeting was high.

During the same day we met also the stakeholders of the Iasi municipal area. Many representative of the economic sector somehow involved in agriculture

and livestock breeding were present at the meeting. From the discussion it was clear that the lack of understanding of the new study structure with some doubt on the possibility to employ the new bachelors. They also emphasized the scarcity of practical work that student can develop during their bachelor studies.

Recommendation: give more confidence to the students increasing the practical activity without compromising the theoretical background. The former is fundamental in constructing a solid education, which is the main task of the university studies. Increase the students studying abroad with Erasmus, which is a very precious opportunity to the students.

Laboratories

During my visit I had the chance to spend some time visiting research laboratories and have free talks with different researchers on their studies. In particular I visited the lab of Fruitculture, Pedology, Soil Science, Medicine, Animal Science, Infective Illness, Animal Anatomy. During this tour I met researchers and again some of the PhD students present to the general meeting of the day before. In this occasion we had the possibility to talk of their studies, their research and their concerns. I could appreciate the high scientific knowledge of all of them and the experience and expertise in their fields. Very interesting has been the visit to the laboratory of Biochemistry and the meeting with Dr Lucia Trinca. Most of the laboratories were very well equipped with modern scientific apparatus but the impression is that in this moment they are not in use, due manly to financial problems. This has been confirmed during the conversations I had.

One important aspect of the university is also to interact with the civil society, opening the laboratories to the necessities of the farmers, manly in the animal sector. In fact, relevant space in the laboratories where reserved to keep animals coming from the private sector for health problems or other illness. This activity is assuring some income, allowing the subsistence of the structure, but is absorbing a lot of time to research. It could be important to balance the time dedicated to research and that dedicated to consultancy.

Recommendation

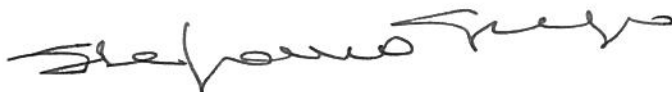
Also in this case is important to have an International Office with experts on constructing research projects at transnational level. The importance of this aspect is growing every day in Europe, due to the shortage of national founds and the necessity to participate to international calls, preparing credible and competitive research proposals. It is also important to enlarge the international network to create more opportunities of participation to the calls. Today this is not an optional anymore!

Final remarks

The University of Agriculture Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi “ Ion Ionescu de la Brad” is an old and very well developed institution which put a lot of effort in updating the structures, the teaching curricula and the research facilities. During my visit I had the opportunity to visit many and interesting structures and to talk with young researchers.

The overall impression is very positive and I tried to give some suggestions to overtake some problems raised during the discussions. I would like to stress again the importance of an over more complete integration in the European academic community for a more harmonic development of the teaching and the research.

On a personal note I would like to thank ARACIS for inviting me to take part in the evaluation of this respected university. I wish also to express my gratitude to the ARACIS Expert Evaluation Panel for the friendly collaboration and assistance during the meetings. I am grateful to the community of University of Agriculture Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi “ Ion Ionescu de la Brad”, its Rector, Pro Rectors, professors, students and staff for the hospitality. A special acknowledge to prof. Nicolai Munteanu for spending his time with me during the visit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stefano Grego', written in a cursive style.

Professor Stefano Grego