



A R A C I S
Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

E x t e r n a l I n s t i t u t i o n a l E v a l u a t i o n
Universitatea Spiru Haret din București, România

F o r e i g n E x p e r t R e p o r t

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em.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Winfried Müller
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

Member of the Pool of Experts
Institutional Evaluation Programme
European University Association

Peer for several European National Quality Assurance Agencies

1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the Spiru Haret University in Bucharest (SHU) for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from November 12 to 15, 2013. This was another evaluation of SHU by ARACIS after the ARACIS-visit in 2012. The main reason for this further ARACIS-evaluation was the aim of SHU to change the actual judgment "limited degree of confidence" to "high degree of confidence". Beside the institutional evaluation, the study programmes "English Language and Literature - Modern Languages and Literatures (French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian/Classic (Latin))", "Physical Education and Sports", "International Relations and European Studies", "Psychology", "Music Education", "Finance and Banking", "Informatics", "Journalism" (all in Bucharest) and "Management (Braşov)", "Management (Constanţa)", "Public Administration (full time) (Braşov)", "Public Administration (part time) (Braşov)", "Pedagogy (Braşov)", "Law (Râmnicu Vâlcea)", "Accounting and Management (Râmnicu Vâlcea)" and "Finance and Banking (Craiova)" were selected to be evaluated too.

During the last four years I have participated in ten ARACIS-evaluations. As a member of the pool of experts of the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) I have participated already in more than 20 evaluations in 7 European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Furthermore, I have also worked as a peer for the Lithuanian Center for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (CQAHE). Hence the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with the ARACIS-evaluations in Romania but also my IEP-background and European perspectives. My focus is on the institution as a whole and not so much on individual study programmes. The self-evaluation process, international perspectives as well as governance and quality assurance are important core elements of my considerations.

I am very grateful to the Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Luca Iamandi and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Răzvan Nistor for conducting the evaluation process in a very efficient way and to all members of the ARACIS team for their constructive and fruitful discussions during the visit.

My special thank goes to the leadership of the Spiru Haret University, Rector Conf. univ. dr. Aurelian A. Bondrea, to the Contact Person Vice-Rector Prof. univ. dr. Gheorghe Bică and to the General Administrative Director Ing. ec. Rebedeu Radu for their hospitality and perfect organization of my visit. I also want to thank Conf. univ. dr. Ruxandra Vasilescu for assisting me with translations during the meetings. Furthermore, I want to express my appreciation to the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. univ. dr. Manuela Epure as well as to the various representatives of SHU including students, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their discussions to an understanding of the institution. Last but not least I want to thank the Technical Secretary Mrs. Livia Dumitraşcu from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for her friendly way of holding contact with me and providing all necessary information for the visit.

2. Organizational Details of Spiru Haret University

The Spiru Haret University was founded in 1991 within the România de Mâine Foundation (Tomorrow's Romania Foundation) and accredited as an higher education institution by law in 2002. It is part of the national Romanian education system, a legal person of private law and public utility. The name Spiru Haret comes from the founder of modern education in Romania before World War I and refers to the intention of the SHU to open higher education in compliance with the democratic changes in Romania after December '89. The University's headquarter is situated in Bucharest. SHU has in its current structure 24 faculties with 24 departments, out of which 14 faculties in 5 different locations in Bucharest, 3 in the city of Braşov, 1 in Câmpulung Muscel, 2 in Constanţa, 2 in Craiova and 2 in Râmnicu Vâlcea. The University offers 88 undergraduate study programmes, out of which 56 are accredited and 32 are authorized for temporary operation. 81 programmes consist of 3 years studies, five programmes in Law of 4 years and Veterinary Medicine and Architecture require 6 years of studies. 19 faculties (out of the 24) provide 44 accredited master study programmes. In addition, 62 postgraduate programmes of training and lifelong learning are offered. Actually SHU has 18784 students compared with 311928 in the academic year 2008/09. After the extraordinary increase of student numbers from 2000 to 2009, student numbers dropped considerably because of the close of of distance learning programmes by the government, the declining demographic situation in Romania, the financial crises and other reasons.

Accordingly decreased the financial resources of the University which do mainly come from school fees, admission and degrees. The total income of SHU in 2011 was 54.7 mio EUR after 89.8 mio EUR in 2009. Due to an excellent financial management SHU has succeeded to handle this dramatic financial change and has still reached a cash surplus also in the years of decreasing student numbers.

The University is led by the Administration Board (Board of Trustees) of 15 members chaired by the President of the Foundation, the Founding Rector Prof. univ. dr. Aurelian Gh. Bondrea. The Senate and the Rector are subordinated to the Administration Board. According to the Statutes of SHU the Rector together with the (seven) Vice-Rectors, the President of the Administration Board and the Director of the Central Research Institute is responsible for the daily management of the University. The General Administrative Director is one of the members of the Administration Board and leads the Administrative Division. The Senate is composed of 26 teachers and 9 students and has according to the Law of National Education 2011 the duty to monitor and control the activity of the executive management. Although the provided Organizational Chart is not fully clear with respect to the distribution of power, all acting top managers seem to have found a way to establish a co-operation and to enable timely decisions.

The University owns land and buildings for teaching and learning, sports, student hostels and canteens in Bucharest and in its five locations outside Bucharest. The visited buildings in Bucharest are in good or even excellent state. Only the Rectorate building, a former bank, seems not be optimal for university purposes. The Senate meeting room and

a visited lecture theater have a strict hierarchical disposal of seats and are not suitable for discussions or interactive learning. But the office staff seems to be quite happy in this building. As the number of students has considerably decreased during the last 3 years, there seem to exist even too many and too large lecture rooms for the actual small student population. So, I have met 8 students attending a class in a lecture hall with about 300 seats.

There are strong competitors in higher education especially in the Bucharest area offering similar or related study programmes. The main advantage of SHU against its competitors is that it enables good personal contacts between teachers and students. Another advantage is that the education at SHU is very practical oriented and students are trained in well equipped facilities.

On the other hand SHU faces several severe challenges:

- SHU suffers from a terrible reputation caused by suspicion from authority and criticism by other institutions of higher education concerning the quality of its huge expansion of distance learning programmes during the years till 2009.
- SHU is in a state of transition. The actual management (Founding Rector and President of the Foundation) is already for many years on duty. According to new regulations, a part of the original (founding) staff had to retire recently or will have to retire soon.
- The ministry has restricted distance learning programmes.
- Some offered programmes are endangered by small student numbers and a lack of attractiveness. This is aggravated by the decreasing number of high school graduates passing the baccalaureat examination in Romania, the growing competition by other universities offering similar or related study programmes and the financial crisis.
- The actual budget of SHU depends mainly on student fees.
- New challenges of the society and the European Higher Education Area (Bologna idea, internationalization, quality assurance, employability, etc.) require universities to react.

3. Outline of the Visit

As already mentioned, Spiru Haret University has completed several evaluations during the last years. Besides the committed leadership of SHU, I had the impression that the majority of staff and students were not really enthusiastic about this frequency of evaluations. The ongoing evaluation exercises and the criticisms and restrictions on SHU seem to have caused some fatigue and resignation within the institution and also within its stakeholders.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

The whole evaluation procedure left the impression of a routine exercise to me, where everybody just confirmed monotonously the high quality of education at SHU, ignoring the classifications of the study programmes in the lower categories D and E and all the stories around the institution. This impression left the self-evaluation report (SER) and also the meetings with students, graduates, teachers and employers. The SER of 132 pages together with 160 Appendices is far too long. It is totally descriptive and repeats over large parts the Law 2011, the University Charter and other regulations. Several parts are redundant (e.g. the description of the management structure in Chapter II, section 2.3 and in Chapter III, Section 3.1.1) and there are many empty phrases, like statements "We have solved ARACIS's recommendations". Other important information such as the actual size and the members of the Administration Board is missing. The whole SER is purely defensive, real problems are ignored and not mentioned and there are no elements of self-evaluation nor future-oriented perspectives. The report is signed by the Rector but the members of the self-evaluation group are not named.

Similar impressions arose from the meetings with the groups of students, graduates, teachers and employers. These meetings were of little real use for the evaluation, groups were too big and statements were all positive. There was no necessity seen to change or improve anything. As I consider the self-evaluation process as a very important step of any evaluation procedure and of improvement, I think SHU has missed the chance to use this evaluation for an institutional-wide discussion on its difficult present situation and its possibilities for the future.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the Spiru Haret University began in the evening of 11th November of 2013 with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Euro Hotel in Bucharest. During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Tuesday, November 12, 2013

The evaluation procedure started punctually at 9:00 a.m. in the Senate meeting room of SHU. Rector Conf. univ. dr. Aurelian A. Bondrea welcomed the ARACIS delegation and introduced the present representatives of the University. Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Luca Iamandi and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Răzvan Nistor presented the members of the ARACIS team.

In the following internal ARACIS team meeting (9:20 to 09:45 a.m.) - the team moved to its working room on the same floor - the Mission Scientific Coordinator pointed out the duty to check the quality of the study programmes under evaluation and discussed different tasks of the evaluation procedure.

From 09:45 a.m. to 13:30 p.m. the evaluation team was guided through several faculty buildings. The first stop was at the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology and the Faculty of Finance and Banking with very good learning facilities (modern equipped labs, therapy rooms, rooms for examinations, computer rooms, several class rooms with ongoing classes,

and two big lecture theaters) and the University's printing unit with excellent state of the art printing equipment. The next stop was at the new building for the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Journalism, Communication and Public Relations and the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports. This building is only three years old and offers excellent facilities. On our tour we met several ongoing classes.

Next to this building is an older building which houses the Faculty of Law and Public Administration, a big auditorium with 800 seats and several TV- and radio studios. The studios are superb and offer all possibilities for brilliant productions. There are daily educational programmes and entertainment shows produced and broadcasted. Finally we had a short visit to SHU's IT-center with servers for the IT-network. On the way for lunch at one of the University restaurants we passed the outdoor sports fields.

From 15:40 to 16:40 p.m. I had a private meeting with the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. univ. dr. Manuela Epure. I was informed on the organization of research at SHU and the efforts to strengthen SHU's research and to make the research output more visible. The competitive income for research projects has been considerably increased during the last years, but with less than 10% of the total budget, is still considerably less than what one will expect from a research university.

From 17:00 to 18:10 p.m. there was a meeting with about 100 graduates working in different fields (sport, management, marketing, law, education, veterinary medicine, professional writing, architecture, music, psychology, informatics, biology, journalism, etc.) There were no complaints or suggestions for alterations with respect to the education at SHU. Practical experience was considered as very important. The invitation for this meeting with the ARACIS team was given by personal phone calls and e-mail. The University collects contact data from all graduates and there exists an alumni association. The only negative point mentioned was the over-boarding bureaucratism for starting a new business in Romania.

From 18:20 to 19:00 p.m. a meeting with about 150 students was arranged. In order to enable a completely open discussion I asked my interpreter from the University not to be present during this meeting with the students. There were students from probably all study programmes and several student members of the Senate and other boards present. The general statements were again very positive. The good relations with teachers, the practical orientation of the education, the excellent facilities and the open atmosphere in the institution were praised. There was no clear statement pro or against the evaluation of teaching. Demand and experience on mobility were rare. The continuous increase of tuition fees and the small number of grants were criticized. Asked by the ARACIS student member on student activities (projects, workshops, exhibitions, etc.), there was no concrete respond.

The day concluded with a short ARACIS meeting where missing documents and open problems were mentioned.

Wednesday, November 13, 2013

In the morning I studied documents and interchanged impressions and findings with other

ARACIS members.

From 12:30 to 13:45 p.m. the ARACIS team had a meeting with about 50 teachers. They were all very positive about the University and did not mention any problems. There was a strong climate of defending SHU and blaming enemies of the institution for existing problems and the bad reputation. When I asked the staff for possibilities of staff training as a consequence of evaluations I did not receive a concrete answer. It seems that supportive instruments following evaluation results are not well developed. The criteria for staff promotion within the institution were said to be clear but changing legal regulations were criticized. The Mission Director and the Scientific Coordinator concluded the session mentioning that the team had the duty to check the criteria set by ARACIS, but will do this without any influence or order from outside.

For 18:00 p.m. the University had invited stakeholders. About 70 persons from schools, public authorities and institutions, enterprises, TV and media, architecture, sport, law, etc. were present. The Vice-Rector Prof. univ. dr. Gheorghe Bică presented the ARACIS team and the Scientific Coordinator asked the stakeholders if the graduates of SHU had the wanted knowledge and abilities. There were again only positive comments, praising the knowledge, the social skills and the capability for team work of the graduates. Many of the present managers and employers offer internships and practica to the students of SHU and have co-operations and partnerships with units from SHU. Some stakeholders stated to be included in curricula discussions too. The Scientific Coordinator concluded the session with the remark that there were only positive aspects mentioned.

Between 19:20 and 19:45:00 p.m. we had a short internal debriefing on our impressions.

Thursday, November 14, 2013

From 9:00 to 9:30 a.m. I checked documents concerning the budget.

Between 9:30 and 10:30 a.m. I had a private meeting with the Administrative Director Ing. ec. Rebedeu Radu. I informed myself how he had managed the big changes since 2009 and asked about further necessary steps caused by the decreasing number of students and lower income. I also clarified some ambiguities in the Organizational Chart. As the Administrative Director is also a member of the Administration Board I asked the Director on his view of the role of the Senate according to the Law 2011 and practical experiences with respect to the co-operation between the Administration Board, the Senate and the Rector.

Afterward, I spoke with three students of Architecture. I asked them on their position concerning the evaluation of teaching by students and on intentions for mobility. One of the students had plans to go to Ireland for an Erasmus semester. With respect to quality assurance in teaching students complained that there was no information given on the results of evaluations. Relations with professors were stated to be very good. Teaching staff was available and present for consultings.

From 10:45 a.m. to 13:15 p.m. and 14:00 to 18:30 p.m. I studied documents and spoke with Prof. Ștefan Oltean on the situation in the Faculty of Letters and with the ARACIS student members about quality assurance and the organization of exams.

Friday, November 15, 2013

At 9:00 a.m. the team members finalized their documents and summarized their impressions. Opinions were interchanged.

From 12:20 to 13:00 p.m. the Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Luca Iamandi chaired the final meeting between the ARACIS experts and the management of SHU. The Mission Scientific Coordinator invited all evaluators to report on their findings. He invited me to start with my report as Foreign Expert. Subsequently, all Coordinators reported about their investigations. Finally the Student Representatives gave a summary on their findings. The Vice-Rector (Contact Person) and the Rector thanked the ARACIS team for their constructive and supportive work and confirmed the institution's aim to become a leading Romanian university. The Mission Director finished the session with the promise to deliver a fair report according to the rules of ARACIS.

In the afternoon I left the University and went to the airport.

4. Governance and Institution

The leadership of the University including the Administrative Director show high identification with the institution and are highly committed to the institution. Improvements especially to strengthen research and make it more visible are going on. SHU has obviously an excellent financial management and administration of its property. But a good university management should recognize when changes and reactions are necessary. It is not the question if the criticisms on SHU from outside were correct or not. There have certainly been made management mistakes in the past and the reaction - if there was any - on the difficult situation was delayed. By my impression actual changes and improvements were more a result of the pressure coming from outside and not motivated by a climate of innovation from inside the institution.

A problem of many private universities is the way, how the "owners" take influence on the institution. From the European point of view a university management 20 years on duty is a very long period. The actual challenges of universities can only be successfully mastered with a strong independent rectorate working within the framework given by the foundation/ the owners. A lack of changes within the managing positions and the governing bodies hinders innovation and fruitful development, which are essential for any higher education institution. A university cannot by anymore managed like a family business.

The organizational structure of SHU is not clear in separating strategic decision bodies and management bodies, continuing the legal situation before the Law 2011 and giving the Foundation the possibility to intervene in the daily business of the Rector. According to Art. 207 of the Law 2011 the Rector, the Vice-Rectors and the Administrative Director are responsible for the executive management on university level. The President of the Administration Board is not mentioned in the Law 2011 in this connection. Moreover, according to the Law 2011 the President of the Senate is more or less the speaker of the Senate and does not have any management function. SHU has given the President a position on the same level as the Rector in the Organizational Chart (Annex 8 of the

SER). On the other side the Administrative Director is mentioned in the Law 2011, but does not figure at all in SHU's Organizational Chart. This means that by my opinion the actual organizational structure of SHU does not fully reflect the intentions of Law 2011. The existing Strategic Plan and Operational Plan do not give detailed indicators, time limits and do not define responsibilities. A real operational plan has to contain these important points and to define precise monitoring procedures in order to check progress. The existence of the Ethic Commission and of the Quality Management Manual together with the Quality Assurance Strategy Plan 2010 to 2014 have to be commended.

Recommendations:

- SHU should listen to criticisms and start an open discussion on its future involving owners, staff, students and stakeholders.
- Clarify the organizational structure of SHU and follow national legislation, even you do not agree with it. The Foundation and the President should withdraw from the executive management of the institution and leave the management to a strong rectorate and a responsibly acting senate. The Foundation should limit its function defining the general framework and monitoring the institution.
- I encourage SHU to consider future evaluations not as inspections but rather as a unique chance to receive the advice of experienced peers. The self-evaluation process as the most important part of any evaluation procedure should be used to start a positive and effective discussion within the university. The elaboration of a self-critical SER with not more than 50 pages will force the self-evaluation group to define priorities for the institution and to restrict on essential facts.
- Monitoring instruments of the progress of the strategic plan should be improved and clear responsibilities and financial needs for the different projects should be defined. Measure progress regularly in form of indicators to be reached and compare with benchmarks from similar institutions.
- The financial resources of SHU should be more diversified. Try to increase own income (consultancies, projects with society) and research money, but also try to cut internal costs.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But in order to be able to discuss and solve also sensitive tasks I strongly recommend to install an inter-university commission with half members coming from SHU and the other half from other universities. Only such a body will be really independent from "not wanted" influences.

Recommendations:

- Evaluate periodically bachelor- and master-programmes with respect to learning outcomes, employability and internationalization and monitor regularly the quality of your education (e.g. by international benchmarks).
- As a necessary reaction to external criticism observe carefully student attendance to classes and the correctness and quality of examination procedures.
- Try to strengthen attractiveness of your study offer by introducing parts of inter-disciplinarity into curricula and avoid not necessary specialization.
- Observe fragmentation of study programmes and try to react on new demands of society concerning education.
- Increase autonomous student work and self learning parts. Enforce contacts between the University and enterprises in order to integrate students into project work.
- Sign contracts with institutions in- and outside Romania for internships.
- Enforce internationalization by providing more English literature in the libraries. Encourage your teachers to use English text books parallel with Romanian books.
- Enable WIFI access in all buildings.

7. Research and Service to Society

There has been made considerable progress with respect to increase research income. But from an international perspective the income is still very low. Research at SHU is still very fragmented and more or less an addition of individual research interests. The SER does not specify any institutional research tasks. The difference between research and consultancies seems not to be fully clear. The composition of text books consumes a lot of time but cannot be considered as research activity. Actually SHU is definitely not a research university and its research is not sufficiently visible.

On the other hand, activities in the region and income from consultancies could be considerably higher.

Recommendations:

- Enforce research activities and try to move from a pure teaching university to a teaching university with research.
- Provide some "seed money" in order to support new research projects and the application for projects.
- Support publications in English language.

- Focus research disciplines and strengthen interdisciplinarity, visibility and co-operations.
- Recruit future academic staff by defining concrete teaching and research profiles.
- Support young research staff by reduction of their teaching load and give financial support for teaching staff to participate at national and international conferences.
- Increase the use of existing Romanian and English text-books in order to save time for research.
- Sign contracts of co-operation with other research institutions in order to provide better research conditions for staff and students.

8. Internationalization

Internationalization is an essential element of higher education. It is a multi-dimensional task taking into account mobility programmes, language policy, curricula, joint study and double degree programmes, collaborative research, conference attendance etc. The broad use of Romanian text-books at SHU hinders internationalization.

Recommendations:

- Support mobility of teachers and students and increase information on international agreements, programmes and grants for students and staff.
- Strengthen the foreign languages policy inside the institution.
- Orientate your curricula according to international standards.
- Strengthen internationalization at home by the invitation of visiting professors from abroad, the offer of courses given in English or another foreign language, the use of English text-books etc.

9. Final Remarks

Please consider these remarks and comments as constructive critiques. This report should assist Spiru Haret University to master its actual difficult situation and to pursue its further path of improvement. The new Romanian legislation could be taken as a starting point to think in new directions and to solve existing problems in order to become a leading Romanian and European university in its areas of teaching and research.

The existing high experience and the excellent facilities concerning distance learning should be used to offer high quality study programmes in all the disciplines represented at Spiru Haret University.



em.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Winfried Müller

