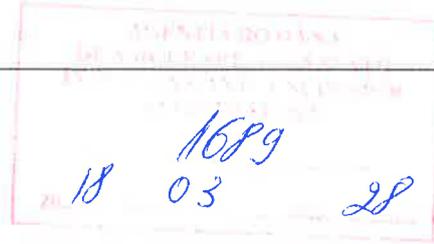


Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE)
External Institutional Evaluation Report
2018



Introduction

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for institutional evaluation of Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE). Prior to the site visit I studied the English version of the Self-assessment Report (SAR) of ASE. During the site visit, which took place at the premises of ASE on 7-9 March 2018, I could enhance the information I had received about ASE and its operation.

The site visit started with an official meeting with the leading representatives of ASE, namely prof. Nicolae Istudor, rector of ASE, and his team of ASE's top leaders. This was followed by an extensive tour of the premises of ASE, its numerous buildings, faculties and departments, the library and other facilities. Also, I visited one of the student dormitories located off the main campus in a recently reconstructed building.

A series of individual meetings as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions (functions) at ASE and beyond followed during the next days of the site visit. I have met representatives of ASE executive management (all over the structure: university, faculties, departments and other units), president of ASE's Senate, representatives of ASE's Committee for Ethics and Professional Conduct, representatives of the Quality Assurance Committee, students, alumni, stakeholders and others. I had a chance to study materials related to management and governance, study provision, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and other aspects of ASE's operation.

I would like to express my gratefulness to Ms Daniela-Mihaela Ispas, the ARACIS officer, for her highly helpful support throughout the evaluation process. Also, I benefited from the collegial approach of the whole group of evaluators led by prof. Ladislau Nagy. I would like to thank prof. Roxana Sarbu, the vice-rector of ASE, and Ms Florina Pasol, an ASE staff member, for the organizational support for our work on the spot. And last but not least, I would like to thank Ms Raduca Elena Hurduzeu for her interpretation during different meetings. All this was very helpful.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned, herewith I submit my report on ASE's institutional performance as I have perceived it. I am well aware that this is a limited view by an external observer/evaluator, and a much deeper insight would be needed to really catch the essence of some issues evaluated. My evaluation, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration, should be understood as a collegial attempt to provide ASE and ARACIS with opinions aiming to contribute to possible improvements at ASE and quality assurance of higher education of Romania.

Mission statement

ASE is a well-established university in the context of Romanian higher education. It seems to play a leading role in the field of higher education and research in economic sciences and public

administration. Nowadays it also plays a significant role internationally; ASE is ranked 151-200 in Top Shanghai 2017 in Economics, which is the highest ranking held by any Romanian university in Shanghai Global Ranking of Academic Subjects 2017.

Its vision and mission are clearly formulated, elaborated, ambitious and, yet, acceptable. As to the vision, ASE *wants to be recognized as one of the leaders in education and research in Social Sciences in central and South Easter Europe, contributing to smart, competitive and sustainable economy and effective public administration, and tends to assert itself worldwide* (SAR, p. 39). As for ASE's mission, it is *of a research intensive university, and responds to societal demands through: high quality study programmes, across all cycles and all forms of undergraduate and postgraduate education; the generation of advanced knowledge; supporting the development and affirmation of the most competitive students and researchers in economic and administrative sciences, as well as in other sub-disciplines of social sciences and humanities.*

A clear set of objectives follows in ASE documentation, structured in three categories: strategic, tactical and operational. Measures, programmes and methodologies are also formulated in these documents.

The Strategy of Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) for 2010-2020 reflects the vision, mission and objectives focusing on development in six domains: education, research, international relations, external relations, infrastructure, and management.

In my view, all of these ASE documents are complementary and represent a very solid fundament on which ASE's activities can be built and further developed.

Academic freedom

ASE declares to adhere to the principles of academic freedom in its *University Charter* (Chapter VI, Article 19). Also, the *Regulation for ASE's Committee for Ethics and Professional Conduct*, adopted by the University Senate, explicitly declares the principle of defending the values of academic freedom, academic autonomy and ethical integrity.

The university bodies are in agreement with legislation and provide the faculties with respective academic freedom.

Academic programmes and student management

ASE offers a variety of programmes, most of them in Romanian language although there are some in English, French and German in the portfolio, too. The programmes cover the whole range of bachelor, master and PhD levels. Also, ASE offers postgraduate programmes. Besides this, ASE organizes summer schools; in 2017, six summer schools took place.

The academic programmes correspond with ASE's mission statement. The academic degrees are in correspondence with international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum seem to be appropriate for the academic degrees awarded. Continuously updated, the programmes mostly correspond with current needs, as was voiced out during a meeting with stakeholders.

The curriculum contains rather high numbers of direct teaching hours per week but, apparently, there is still enough scope for independent study, reflection and analysis. The workload is manageable for students; the ECTS are calculated properly.

Typically, two forms of study are applied, full-time and part-time (distant learning). Like in many other higher education institutions in Romania and other countries, a significant number of students (even those in the full-time form of study) combine study and work. This generates some valuable opportunities (especially in case the work is directly related to the field of study) as well as some challenges (the question of proportions and scheduling, for instance).

One significant feature of most programmes is internships, which in many cases seem to be results of successful cooperation between ASE (and its faculties and departments) and the world of labour and the labour market.

Students have the opportunity to give feedback to study programmes and the teaching process as such; in some extent, alumni and stakeholders have access to the study programmes as well. During our interviews, students were usually positive about study programmes and the teaching process. They had some particular suggestions as for the proportion of theoretical and practical parts of their programmes (mostly in favour of more practice) and as for the position of physical education in their curriculum (perhaps too prominent in some students' opinions), for instance. Also, most alumni and stakeholders were positive about the programmes, sometimes in a critical-friendly manner, suggesting more current and internationally focused approaches in some courses.

Students are organized in their own union. They account for 25% of the members of the University Senate, having their own chamber with a chairperson. The Senate is only established on the university level but proportionate representation of students from all faculties is guaranteed.

Recommendations:

- Continue creating opportunities to link teaching and research on the master level
- Continue developing the practice of the involvement of students and other stakeholders in the design and adaptation of programmes

Research

ASE declares itself as a research-intensive university. Obviously, this raises high expectations for research performance. A significant amount of research activities is conducted at ASE.

The Division of Research and Innovation Management coordinates research activities at ASE. There are 23 research centres at the university. Current ASE management makes efforts to cultivate discussions about research and research culture within the university.

ASE has introduced measures to encourage excellent research results (articles in well-databased journals are rewarded financially; work on publications is taken into account in terms of hours staff members are supposed to perform; and the like). Also, there is support for the participation of academics at conferences.

Twenty scientific journals are published at ASE, of which 16 are displayed in a list on ASE's English webpage, but only one link works (that of the journal *Theoretical and Applied Economics*). The way the journals are presented in the English version of ASE's web page is not very good.

ASE organizes numerous scientific conferences, national and international, on a regular basis.

There are some projects based on external grants at ASE that the staff works on but, seemingly, this is a challenging issue due to the scarcity of nationally available grants and tough competition for international research grants, especially in basic research. It seems that there is a lively research cooperation with businesses and some other stakeholders, which is undoubtedly a promising way of making use of the potential of applied research at ASE.

The concept of PhD studies is research-driven, which is a positive direction. There is a Doctoral Institute on the ASE level and 11 doctoral schools located at different faculties and departments. They seem to be the structural core of doctoral studies. This is a good precondition for linking specific research projects (dissertations) to existing research directions at ASE. On the other hand, it seems that supervisor training is not done in a very systematic form.

Recommendations:

- Consider some more options of encouraging the development/maintenance of quality research at ASE and for various groups of academics, perhaps by developing an internal system of supportive grants for research activities
- Develop and implement a training system for PhD project supervisors (perhaps for master project supervisors as well)
- Continue promoting ASE's journals so that they can meet requirements for highly respected international databases
- Improve the presentation of research projects/results and scientific journals in the English version of ASE's webpage

International cooperation

International cooperation seems to be a properly developing area of ASE's operation. The Department of International Relations was established as a special unit to support this. There are rising figures in almost every scheme covering student exchange and academic as well as non-academic staff exchange with relevant institutions in Europe and elsewhere.

Also, significant numbers of international guest staff (professors in particular) at ASE should be mentioned as a good sign of internationalization. The existence of programmes in foreign languages is a good platform for work with incoming students. Nevertheless, the number of outgoing and incoming students/staff members is not balanced, which may be something to work on in a long run. Research internationalization has a potential for ASE's further development and should be supported.

No doubt, there are dynamic and positive developments as for internationalization at ASE, which should continue. The website presentation of points related to ASE internationalization is very good.

Recommendation:

- Strive to reach more balance between the numbers of incoming and outgoing students/staff in exchange schemes

Staff

ASE has a large number of highly qualified staff, many of whom hold positions of professors and associate professors. Some staff members have excellent practical experience in top positions in relevant spheres. Students as well as alumni were positive about the staff and their quality. International staff members usually come to ASE for limited periods (block teaching, individual lectures), which can also be seen as a positive tendency.

As for teaching, it seems that the development of teaching skills of the staff is not supported by systematic training in place, and training in research methodology, in general terms, shows a potential of further development. An offer for leadership training was given to staff members in leadership positions of various levels.

Recommendation:

- Consider providing the staff with more development opportunities, both in teaching skills and research methodology skills

Organization and management

ASE is a well-established university. It consists of 12 faculties. There are logically elaborated institutional, administrative as well as managerial structures at ASE. In principle, these structures support its efficient operation.

Management and administration are well developed vertically and horizontally and in other directions across the institution according to the nature of specific tasks. Specific levels of faculties and departments seem to be logically built and interconnected.

Some aspects of the operation of ASE, such as centralized budget and the existence of the Senate on the university level only, indicate centralization. This may have good reasons as well as certain limitations.

I had a chance to talk to four representatives of the Ethical Commission which was established at ASE in 2017 (total number of members being 13). The Commission deals with issues/complaints submitted by students and the staff, predominantly those concerning the teaching process and relational issues between/among people at ASE (one issue was pointed out as particular focus by the chair of the Commission, prof. Virginia Maracine: mobbing). It seems that the Commission has not yet dealt with ethics of research. The Commission, whose members represent all faculties and the Senate, works with respect to the Code of Ethics. As we were informed, the conclusions of the commission are accepted by leaders of ASE and projected into their actions.

Recommendation:

- Consider possibilities for decentralization in some aspects such as budgeting

Finances and infrastructure / Space and equipment

State budget allowances prevail as income and make the most significant part of the budget of ASE. It is rather centralized money, as already mentioned. Besides that, there are sources of income such as the fees of tuition, admission, licence, revenues, sponsorships, rents and others. ASE also runs a scholarship scheme and some other forms of social assistance to students. This money comes from

state budget allocations and other resources.

ASE has a number of buildings at its disposal. They are well or even very well equipped and can serve sufficiently for learning/teaching purposes, research and other relevant activities. Some rooms were equipped with financial help from cooperating businesses.

The dormitories seem to be sufficiently equipped as well, as students confirmed during our group discussion. Some dormitories/guest houses have been recently reconstructed and seem to fit their purpose faultlessly.

The library also provides appropriate services for students and the staff. It is important to add that besides offering a large number of professional literature the library provides access to relevant international databases.

Several large-scale computer rooms are available at ASE.

The canteen is a part of the main campus and provides services in good quality, as we could experience.

We did not visit off-campus facilities.

The information system used at ASE (including the Moodle system in action) supports the processes of administration and learning/teaching. A Wi-Fi connection is available all over the main premises of ASE.

In general, students were satisfied with the facilities. Some of them expressed their wish to have more (current) literature available.

Quality management

ASE has a well-developed structure of quality assurance. The processes of quality assurance seem to be going well. Consisting of academics, students and trade union representatives, a Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance Committee works at the university level. This body coordinates the main procedures and activities including annual Self-assessment Reports on the academic quality assurance at ASE. Committees for quality assurance were established at the level of each faculty as well. In terms of administration, the process is backed by the Bureau for Quality Management and Internal Managerial Control.

There are several dominant directions on which quality assurance is focused. Intense attention seems to be aimed at the development of study programmes (teaching and learning) but research and some other aspects are involved as well.

Evaluation relates to staff performance (based on indicators previously agreed), peer evaluation, students' evaluation of the teaching process and evaluation by teams of university management. This altogether creates a rather complex set of evaluation activities that are focused on the quality assurance of major processes at ASE.

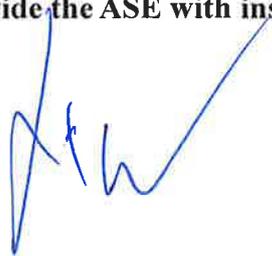
Recommendations:

- Consider possibilities of further development of quality assurance focused on research and non-academic (administration) support

- Consider ways of working with the results of students' evaluation as a part of the dialogue with the student body at ASE

Final recommendation

I recommend to provide the ASE with institutional accreditation with the rating High Confidence.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'M. Pol', is written over the text of the recommendation.

Professor Milan Pol

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Czech Republic

Brno, March 19, 2018