



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 "Dunărea de Jos" din Galați, 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 University "Dunărea de Jos" (UDJ) in Galați for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from October 23 to 25, 2013. This was the second evaluation of UDJ by ARACIS after the ARACIS-visit in 2008. Beside the institutional evaluation the study programmes "Welding Engineering", "Thermal Equipments and Systems", "Technology of Machines Development", "Mechatronics", "Power Electronics and Drives", "Applied Electronics", "Materials Science", "Biotechnical and Environmental Systems Engineering", "Food Products Engineering", "Philosophy", "Orthodox Didactic Theology", "Performing Arts", "Finance and Banking", "Public Administration" and "Physical Education and Sports" were selected to be evaluated too.

During the last four years I have participated in nine 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 Centre 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. Lazăr Vlăsceanu and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Nicolae Todea 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 thank goes to the leadership of the University "Dunărea de Jos", Rector Prof. univ. dr. Iulian Gabriel Bîrsan and the Contact Person Vice-Rector Prof. univ. dr. Toader Munteanu for their hospitality and perfect organization of my visit. Especially I want to thank also Vice-Dean Ass.Prof. dr. Ștefan Baltă and the International Relations Officer dr. Alexandru Praisler for their permanent assistance during the visit. Furthermore, I also want to express my appreciation to the President of the Senate Prof. univ. dr. Lucian Puiu Georgescu, to the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. univ. dr. Anca Ioana Nicolau as well as to the various representatives including students of UDJ, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their open discussions to a good understanding of the institution. Last but not least I want to thank the Technical Secretary Mrs. Carmen Mirian and Mr. Mihai Marcu from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for their friendly way of holding contact with me and providing all necessary information for the visit.

2. Organizational Details of the University "Dunărea de Jos"

The University "Dunărea de Jos" (UDJ) is a public university located in Galați, Romania. UDJ was founded as University of Galați in 1974 by merging the Polytechnical Institute and the College of Education of Galați. The Polytechnical Institute arose from the Naval and Mechanic Engineering Institute, founded already in 1951, and the later included Institute of Fish Breeding and Fishing from Constanța and the Institute for Food Industry from Bucharest. In 1991, the UDJ received its actual name.

UDJ is a well-established higher education institution in the southeast of Romania of high regional relevance. The traditional disciplines in the technical field (land development, ship-building, food industry and fishery, mechanical-, automotive- and environmental engineering) are still the strong areas of the institution. UDJ is structured in 15 Faculties with 56 Departments and 24 Research Centres. In the academic year 2012/13 UDJ had 13430 students at all three levels of Bachelor, Master and PhD. According to the Self Evaluation Report (SER), the University offers 78 Bachelor programmes (some delivered as distance programmes), 67 Master programmes (some of these offered in English or French language) in various technical, humanistic, economic, health and artistic fields and PhD studies in 12 scientific areas, organized in doctoral schools for technical studies and social sciences. Until 1990, some of UDJ's engineering programmes were unique in Romania and are still serving as a reference for other universities.

The main campus of UDJ is located in Galați. There are two additional campuses, one in Braila and the other in the Republic of Moldova. The visited buildings in Galați were all in good or even excellent state. They provide excellent facilities and equipment (partially co-financed by EU funds) for its researchers and students.

From a geographical and historical perspective, UDJ is located in a favorable location with easy access from neighbouring countries such as Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Moldova, etc. There is only one real competitor in higher education in the Galați area - the private "Danubius" University - offering study programmes in the fields of law, economy and communication sciences.

The main financial resources of the University come from the government. Major sources of own income are taxes and research money. The total income of UDJ in 2012 was 115,996,871 Lei after 139,142,350 Lei in 2011. For its base activity in 2012, UDJ had to spend 57.17% of its total budget, composed of 40.55% of budgetary allowances and 16.62% from own income.

In October 2012 UDJ had 673 tenured professors and 57 research assistants. In addition 372 teaching positions were listed as non-occupied. The total number of teaching staff was about 1140 complemented by about 250 administrative staff.

The Rector together with five Vice-Rectors and a person in charge of the PhD-studies is responsible for the daily management of the University. The Senate is composed of 60 teachers and 20 students and has according to the Law of National Education 2011 the duty to monitor and control the activity of the executive management and to approve proposals by the management.

UDJ faces several challenges:

- UDJ has a decreasing number of student applications caused by the decreasing number of high school graduates in Romania in general and a declining attractiveness of some of its study programmes.
- The government funding to UDJ has been permanently cut during the last years and the crisis and the economically weak region southeast Romania makes alternative funding scarce.
- UDJ is in a state of transition having recently implemented the new Law of National Education 2011. The actual management is facing a highly fragmented structure (complex organizational structure, big number of similar and overlapping study programmes) and complicated decision-making procedures.
- Modern university management requires small decision-making bodies. The Senate and also the Management Council are quite big and the interaction of Rectorate and Senate is still under development.
- The challenges of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna idea, internationalization, quality assurance, employability, etc.) impose additional tasks to universities.

3. Outline of the Visit

The Self Evaluation Report (SER) provided by "Dunărea de Jos" University consists of 76 pages with references to 171 Annexes. The first half of the SER describes the development of the institution since its foundation and its actual situation. Informative data on the management, teaching and research is provided. The second part of the SER refers to the numerous Annexes. It is redundant with respect to several points of the first part and not readable without the Annexes. I have the impression that both parts of the SER were elaborated separately and not fully synchronized. A SWOT analysis concludes the SER. Some interesting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are listed. Nevertheless, the SWOT analysis is not very critical and important problems are not discussed clearly or even mentioned. The document is signed by the Rector but the members of the self-evaluation group are not named. As I consider the self-evaluation process as a very important step of any evaluation procedure I think UDJ has not fully taken advantage of the chance to use this evaluation for an institutionalwide discussion on its present situation and problems and possibilities for the future.

The institutional evaluation visit to the University "Dunărea de Jos" began in the evening of 22nd October of 2013 with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Hotel Vega in Galați. During the evaluation visit I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

Wednesday, October 23, 2013

The evaluation procedure started punctually at 9:00 a.m. in the Senate meeting room of

UDJ. Rector Prof. univ. dr. Iulian Gabriel Bîrsan welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof. univ. dr. Nicolae Todea presented the ARACIS team and gave a short overview on the evaluation procedure. Subsequently UDJ's Contact Person Vice-Rector Prof. univ. dr. Toader Munteanu presented the attending representatives of UDJ.

In the following internal ARACIS team meeting (9:15 to 09:45 a.m.) some ARACIS documents were distributed. Because of an unexpected health problem, the Technical Secretary Mr. Mihai Marcu had to be replaced on short notice by Mrs. Carmen Mirian. Prof. univ. dr. Nicolae Todea explained to the Team what he wanted especially to be reviewed in course of the evaluation. Changes of the study programmes should be observed and the actual programmes should be compared with known European programmes. Prof. univ. dr. Radu Oprean was given the responsibility for the follow-up procedure for all programmes within the medical sciences study domain.

From 09:45 to 12:00 a.m. the evaluation team was guided through UDJ's faculty building. The Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (Mechatronics and Robotics, Automotive Engineering, etc.), the Faculty of Food Sciences and Engineering (Food Engineering, Environmental Science, etc.), the Faculty of Naval Architecture as well as several highly specialized labs with expensive state-of-the-art equipment were visited. Explanations were given by teachers and PhD-students. The integration of students into the research projects and the high quality of the performed research were evident. An introduction to procedures of food control and a tasting of local food products concluded the tour.

From 12:00 to 12:45 p.m. I had a private meeting with the President of the Senate Prof. univ. dr. Lucian Puiu Georgescu. We discussed the role of the Senate according to the Law 2011 and practical experiences with respect to the co-operation between the Senate and the Rectorate (Administrative Council).

At 13:00 Archbishop dr. Casian Crăciun of Galați welcomed the ARACIS team in the cathedral. He explained the good relations with the University and guided through the two libraries of the church, which are of great importance for the whole country.

After lunch, from 14:40 to 16:00 p.m. I visited the Department of Aquaculture, the leading Romanian research centre for the breeding and observation of sturgeons. Afterwards I checked documents concerning the organizational structure (faculties, departments) and study programmes of UDJ.

From 18:00 to 19:00 p.m. there was a meeting with 35 graduates, working in different fields (engineering, economics, food chemistry, communication, theatre, naval architecture, teaching, etc.) There were no severe complaints or suggestions for alterations with respect to the education at UDJ. Practical experience was considered as very important and should be increased during education. Noticeable was that none of the 35 graduates had created his/her own business. The invitation for this meeting with the ARACIS team was given by personal phone calls.

From 19:00 to 20:00 p.m. a meeting with 10 (3 females) students was arranged. This meeting was chaired by the ARACIS Student Representatives Patricia Couți and Alin Cristian Sfetcu. The small number of students present was fine in order to conduct an

open discussion, but the problem with this student group was that there was only one student from sports, one from English literature and 8 came from mechanical engineering. That means that the majority of the disciplines like economy, medicine, science, etc. was not represented. The students were very passive and there was no enthusiasm or critical mind visible. There were no students present with mobility experience. As reasons for the lack of mobility financial problems and poor knowledge of languages were stated. But the students were able to understand and answer my questions in English.

Students do not receive a common e-mail address from the University. Contacts with teachers are realized on a personal level. Participation of students in the evaluation procedure of teachers is extremely low.

Summarizing, students did not mention any special incidents or irregularities. But support for student mobility and student involvement in the different bodies of the University (especially in the field of quality assurance) as well as the promotion of e-learning seem to be areas for improvement.

Thursday, October 24, 2013

From 9:00 to 09:30 a.m. I had a private meeting with Rector Prof. univ. dr. Iulian Gabriel Bîrsan. We discussed the relations Rectorate-Senate, the complex structure of UDJ and the necessity for simplification of the structure and decision processes.

From 09:30 to 10:15 a.m. I visited the Central Library. On this occasion I had the possibility to have a look at recently elaborated PhD-dissertations at UDJ.

Between 10:15 and 11:15 a.m. I studied electronic documents provided on a computer in the Rectorate. Afterwards I had the opportunity to meet the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. univ. dr. Anca Ioana Nicolau and discuss the situation of research at UDJ. There are 24 research centres but a reduction/merger is planned. Excellent research is mainly linked to the traditional technical fields (naval architecture, food industry and engineering, mechanical-, automotive- and environmental engineering, etc.).

From 11:45 a.m. to 13:30 p.m. I studied documents concerning the organizational structure of UDJ, number of vice-rectors, PhD responsible persons, faculties, departments, research centres as well as the curricula of Naval Architecture and Mathematics.

These investigations were carried on after lunch from 14:30 to 18:00 p.m.

For 18:00 p.m. the ARACIS Student Representatives had invited for another meeting with students. The reason for this additional meeting was the non-satisfying meeting from the day before. This time 34 (4 females) students appeared. Also student representatives in the Senate and in Faculty Councils were present. There were again no severe complaints. Insufficient possibilities to work in expensive equipped labs for undergraduate students were stated. Libraries are ok but during winter too cold for working.

There was evidently no interest at all in quality assurance procedures and the regularly offered evaluation of teachers. Students stated that they did not trust the procedure and were afraid of loss of anonymity. Furthermore, there was no information on the results of evaluations given to students, neither on department nor on faculty level.

There was again no student present with mobility experience or plans for a student-

exchange. As main problems were mentioned again financial and language problems. From 19:00 to 20:40 p.m. the ARACIS team met 30 (11 females) stakeholders/employers. There were important personalities of public life, economy and cultural institutions present. The president of the local government praised the importance of UDJ for the region and mentioned several important educational and research units. Being himself a medical doctor he praised among others the importance of medicine and nursing for the region. Several representatives of the naval architecture field (Belgium and Dutch shipbuilding companies) commended the theoretical education of students in the field of Naval Architecture, but mentioned a lack of practical experience, poor technical writing, problems with English and not developed soft skills. For the field of teacher education more pedagogical training was asked. Lifelong learning was considered as an important activity for UDJ. During the second half of the meeting the actual educational system in Romania was discussed and partially criticized.

Between 20:40 and 21:00 p.m. we had a short debriefing on our impressions and discussed the oral presentation for next day.

Friday, October 25, 2013

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

I had a private meeting with the Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Lazăr Vlăsceanu and with Prof. univ. dr. Radu Oprean informing them on my impressions and findings. I mentioned the complex relation between Rectorate and Senate, the highly fragmented structure of UDJ and the huge number of partially overlapping study programmes.

From 10:00 to 11:15 a.m. the Mission Director Prof. univ. dr. Lazăr Vlăsceanu chaired the final meeting between the ARACIS experts and the management of UDJ. He started with a short statement on the evaluation. Afterwards he invited me as Foreign Expert, the Student Representatives and the Team Coordinator to inform on their impressions and investigations. Finally the Mission Director summarized the preliminary results of the evaluation visit. Strengths and weaknesses were mentioned and also some first recommendations given. Finally the Rector thanked the ARACIS team for their constructive and supportive work.

Before my departure to Bucharest at 12:00 a.m. I took the opportunity to interchange with other team-members on our main findings.

4. Governance and Institution

The University "Dunărea de Jos" goes actually through a difficult period of transition. During the last two years the University implemented the new Law of National Education 2011. The new leadership is very engaged and highly committed to the institution. The management structures at university level are the Administration Council (chaired by the Rector) and the Senate. The Rector and the President of the Senate are fully aware of the problems and challenges the University is facing. But as in many other universities

in Romania the President of the Senate was a competitor of the elected Rector for the position of the rector. Both, President of the Senate and Rector have their individual view on the further development of the University. The composition of the Senate with 80 members reflects the aim of the departments and faculties to be represented in the highest governing board. As a consequence many members of the Senate act evidently as representatives and defender of their unit and not for the institution as a whole. Senates of this size have more a preserving character than being a motor for innovation and changes. This is reflected also by the fact that a considerable number of proposals by the Rector is rejected by the Senate. Under these circumstances it is very difficult for the leadership to perform necessary reforms and changes. According to the interpretation of Law 2011 by the Senate all proposals or initiatives approved by the Administrative Council must be approved again by the Senate. Hence, responsibilities are overlapping and the decision-making procedures are very complicated. This is certainly one of the reasons why necessary steps to simplify the complex structure and the fragmented study offer of UDJ are not or only slowly realized. Responsibilities according to Law 2011 concerning the management need to be clearly defined, giving the Rector full responsibility for the operational management of the institution and the Senate the power for all strategic decisions.

With respect to human resources, UDJ is carrying over vacant positions from year to year. This is a common procedure of many Romanian universities which makes realistic planning very difficult. UDJ states having about one-third of all positions vacant.

Another observation concerns the administrative staff. It was evident during the visit that many administrative tasks are performed by academic teachers. The University should try to have enough and competent administrative persons to take care of administrative work (e.g. the collection of data) in order to support and unburden teaching staff.

Recommendations:

- Simplify the governance model and the decision-making procedures.
- Define clear responsibilities between Administrative Council and Senate giving the Rector full responsibility for the operational management of the institution and the Senate the power for all strategic decisions.
- Reduce the number of faculties concentrating engineering disciplines in one or two faculties and merging History, Letters and parts of Social Sciences.
- Reduce the number of departments and research centres making better use of synergies and building critical masses.
- Strategical planning should be based on realistic data and necessities and not on positions already vacant for years.
- The number of competent administrative staff should be increased. Administrative work should be done by administrative staff and not by teaching staff.

- UDJ should not consider evaluations as inspections but rather as a unique chance to receive the advice of experienced peers for improvements and changes.
- Start an open discussion on the future of UDJ including opinion leaders of the University and stakeholders from outside.
- Strengthen relations and information flow with graduates and employers. The University should make better use of these groups and formalize the relations (e.g. alumni association, association friends of UDJ).
- The educational programme offer is very broad and overlapping. Reduce the number of study programmes. Study programmes not any more attractive should be replaced by more sought after programmes.

5. Quality Culture

Quality assurance at UDJ is the responsibility of the Senate through the Quality Committee and corresponding committees at faculty and departmental level. The University has started in 2007 quality control processes and procedures and has elaborated a Quality Manual. However, the UDJ still has to go a long way to establish an internal quality culture. The quality assurance system is still not fully functioning. There exist big differences concerning quality assurance procedures between the faculties. Actual quality assurance procedures seem to be more focused on control rather than supportive activities. It is not clear how the collected data is used for decisions by the University's management. The feedback loops are not closed, consequences and supportive instruments are missing. Instruments motivating students and teachers are not realized (e.g. excellent teacher, very good student). Quality assurance should not be considered as a burden but as an important instrument for improvement covering all aspects (teaching, research, administration) of the institution. The engagement of students in quality assurance is completely passive. Students seem not to take any ownership of quality assurance processes. They do not trust the system and cannot see any effects or improvements caused by the evaluation of teachers.

Recommendations:

- Define clear procedures how to improve teaching, research and administration by the extensively collected information and the results of different evaluations.
- Use the collected data in order to provide advice. Develop mechanisms to support academic staff in their teaching and research missions (e.g. staff training).
- Create incentives for excellent teaching and research (e.g. award excellent teacher, recognized researcher).
- Increase motivation of staff and students for taking ownership of quality assurance.

- Students should be involved in quality assurance procedures according to the ESG.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality of the formation at UDJ is recognized by employers and graduates. The visited facilities and premises are in an excellent condition. But the offer of different study programmes is huge and highly fragmented. Study programmes are associated with departments and in most cases teaching staff teach on programmes of their own department. As a consequence similar programmes are established by different departments and multidisciplinary programmes are rare. Especially for a regional university like UDJ it is important to educate graduates with more knowledge broadness and job flexibility.

Some educational programmes are not any more attractive and are attended by a small number of students. The decreasing number of applications for several Bachelor programmes could be a risk for the quality of the education too. There are evidently deficiencies in following the Bologna ideas (shift to a student centered education, more selective subjects, encourage mobility, focus on employability, etc.). E-learning instruments are not developed at all. Deficits concerning the knowledge of foreign languages were mentioned by employers and students. Engineers without the knowledge of foreign languages have no future in Europe.

Support services for graduates for establishing their own company (incubator, entrepreneurship, spin-offs, etc.) do not exist. None of the graduates met has founded his/her own enterprise.

Recommendations:

- Evaluate periodically bachelor- and master-programmes with respect to learning outcomes, employability and internationalization and monitor regularly the quality of education (e.g. by international benchmarks).
- Merge similar study programmes and create new programmes with a focus on attractiveness and interdisciplinarity.
- Increase autonomous student work and self-learning parts. Enforce contacts between the University and enterprises in order to integrate students into project work.
- Establish a common e-learning platform for the whole University.
- Provide a common e-mail address to all students and staff members.
- Establish a unit in order to support entrepreneurship, etc.
- Formalize contacts with stakeholders and employers in order to monitor and improve the quality of education.
- Enforce internationalization by using English text books beside Romanian literature.

- Increase the number of mobility agreements for students and staff of all faculties with other universities and research institutions.

7. Research and Service to Society

Research is one field where the University has already taken important steps of concentration and simplification in order to be more visible, to create critical masses for research groups and to strengthen interdisciplinary research. UDJ performs excellent research in some specific areas. This is proved by the research funds coming from national and international projects and by publications in international recognized journals. The research intensive areas are mainly the traditional technical fields of the University. However, research activity is much less significant in other areas like humanities, medicine and social sciences. As the region of southeast Romania is one of the weaker economical parts of Romania, external funding for the mentioned disciplines is difficult. Nevertheless, all scientific areas of UDJ should be able to offer special services for the region and attract some project money or sign consulting contracts (enterprises, public authorities, non-government organizations).

Recommendations:

- Further reduce the number of research centres and try to focus UDJ's research activities.
- Strengthen and ensure the principles of excellent research for all disciplines and faculties.
- Create critical masses of research groups by enforcing co-operations with other institutions.
- Support interdisciplinary research.
- Support young research staff by reduction of their teaching load and give financial support for teaching staff to participate to national and international conferences, to research collaborations and advanced training courses.
- Use of historical relations in order to intensify research co-operations and exchange programmes with neighbouring countries (Greece, Turkey, Moldova, Serbia, etc.).

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. UDJ is aware of these tasks and has taken first steps (International Office at university level,

agreements with foreign institutions, programmes offered in English or French, etc.) to strengthen internationalization. Nevertheless, mobility numbers are not very high and staff and students with international experience are rare. There is certainly a possibility to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries like Greece, Turkey, Moldova, Serbia etc. The connections given by the river Danube offer historical possibilities for exchange and co-operation. Areas of importance for other countries like Naval Architecture or Food Engineering, Aquaculture open interesting possibilities for co-operations and possible joint study or double degree programmes.

Recommendations:

- Further support mobility of teachers and students.
- Strengthen the foreign languages policy inside the institution.
- Orientate the curricula according to international standards.
- Establish joint study and double degree programmes with comparable institutions.

9. Final Remarks

The University "Dunărea de Jos" is a well-established and comprehensive higher education institution, having a strong leadership, highly motivated staff, and interested students. The regional role of UDJ is very strong and stakeholders confirm its leading position in the region. Nevertheless, for its further successful development, UDJ has to solve several internal problems (beside the existing external challenges).

After the implementation of the Law of Education 2011, the experiences with the new governing bodies should be used to create efficient decision procedures necessary for a modern university management. Modern effective management structures require small decision-making bodies without redundancies and delays. Hence, governance model and decision-making procedures at UDJ have to be simplified. (Remark: The Senate of the University of Vienna, an institution much bigger than UDJ, has only 18 members.)

Similar arguments hold for the organizational structure and the study offer of UDJ. The actual organizational structure of UDJ with 15 thematically overlapping faculties and a huge number of very similar study programmes with a strong specialization does not anymore correspond to the needs of society and has to be streamlined and simplified. New demands of our society should be considered and answered by the University offering new programmes (interdisciplinary programmes, life-long-learning courses, etc.). Links to employers should be strengthened, co-operations established and curricula flexibly organized. Another field of action should be the engagement of well trained and competent administrative staff in order to relieve the academic leadership and also to guarantee some continuity because of changing academic officials.

Please consider these remarks and comments as constructive critics. This report should assist the University "Dunărea de Jos" to master its actual difficult situation and pursue its further path of improvement. The new Romanian legislation could be taken as a starting point to think in new directions. UDJ has the capacity for change and should not miss the time slot to restructure to an internationally recognized modern European higher education institution.



em.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Winfried Müller

