



ARACIS

Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

External Institutional Evaluation

Universitatea "Vasile Alecsandri" din Bacău, România

Foreign Expert Report

14th April 2016

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

Peer of several
European Quality Assurance Agencies

1. Introduction

This report summarizes my impressions as Foreign Expert from the visit to the “Vasile Alecsandri” University (VAUB) in Bacău for an external institutional evaluation by ARACIS from April 6 to 8, 2016. Beside the institutional evaluation, 7 study programmes of VAUB were selected for assessment too. This was the third evaluation of VAUB after the ARACIS-visits in 2009 and 2011.

During the last 16 years, I have participated already in more than 40 evaluations of Higher Education Institutions in nine European countries, in Colombia and in Nigeria. Hence, the following observations and comments will not only reflect my experiences with VAUB but also give international 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. Ladislau Nagy and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Călin Roșca for conducting this 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 thanks go to the Technical Secretary Mrs. Carmen Mirian from ARACIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this evaluation and for her friendly way of holding contact with me, providing all necessary information and support for the visit.

I also give my cordial thanks to the Rector Prof.univ.dr.ing. Carol Schnakovsky, to the President of the Senate Prof.univ.dr.ing. Valentin Nedeff from the “Vasile Alecsandri” University in Bacău for the friendly welcome and support as well as to Vice-rector Prof.univ.dr. Adriana-Gertruda Romedea for the perfect organisation of my visit.

I also want to express my appreciation to the various representatives of VAUB including students, who have actively participated in the meetings.

2. Organisational Details of the “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău

The “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău (VAUB) is a public institution of higher education founded as a Pedagogical Institute in 1961. In 1991 the Higher Education Institute in Bacău was transformed into the University of Bacău. Finally, in 2009 the University of Bacău changed its name to “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău. The city of Bacău is the capital of the county of Bacău located in the central part of Moldavia. The University plays an important role for the cultural, social and economic development of the region Moldavia and the North-East of Romania. The mission of VABU highlights its academic role as well as its role as a driver for the regional development.

The University has two campuses (Mărășești Campus, Spitu Haret Campus) and is organised in 5 Faculties (Engineering; Letters; Sciences; Economic Sciences; Movement, Sports and Health Sciences) and a Department for Teacher Training. The Institute of Research, Development, Innovation, Consultancy, and Technological Transfer coordinates the research. VAUB has fully implemented the Bologna three cycle study structure. In the academic year 2014/15 there were 5073 students enrolled, namely 3905 in 35 Bachelor programmes of three, resp. four years duration, 988 students in 37 Master programmes of 2, resp. 1.5 years

duration, 43 students in Doctoral studies in the areas of Environmental Engineering and Industrial Engineering, and 137 students in post-graduate studies.

On September 30, 2015, the University had a total of 202 tenured teaching staff and 24 administrative/auxiliary staff. 96.85% of the teaching staff hold the PhD. In 2014/15 there were 54 teaching positions vacant which gives a filling ratio of 78,9%.

According to the provided information and observations during the visit, the buildings of VAUB are well kept. Classrooms and laboratories are equipped properly, but some of them need to be refurbished. Both campuses give also access for handicapped persons to their installations.

The financial resources of the University do mainly come from the government, from tuition-fees of students as well as from research and consulting. According to the provided information the revenue in 2015 was 37.458.391 Lei and 8.278.393 Lei carryover from 2014, compared with 42.339.324 Lei expenditure and a carryover of 3.397.460 Lei to 2016. The revenue from basic funding by the Government in 2015 was 16.629.412 Lei and 5.472.435 Lei for student welfare installations and safety equipment, canteen, dormitories, etc.

The University is governed by the Senate and the Administrative Council. The Senate consist of 32 members (24 academics and 8 students) and - according to the Law of National Education 2011 – has the task to monitor and control the activity of the executive management. The Administrative Council is formed by the Rector, the 5 Vice-Rectors, the Deans, the General Administrative Director, one student and some other leading managers.

3. Outline of the Visit

During the last years, the University has taken important steps of improvement and many of the recommendations of the ARACIS evaluation 2011 and the 2013/14 institutional evaluation of the European University Association have been considered and realized.

3.1 The Self-Evaluation Process

VAUB has elaborated an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of 65 pages for this ARACIS evaluation, which contains useful information and states the most important facts. As usual in Romania, the SER is not very self-critical. However, at the end it gives an interesting compilation on the stage of implementation of the ARACIS recommendations of 2011. The SER is redundant in several aspects und could have been written in a more compact form without losing information. On the other hand, it does not describe actual problems and challenges of VAUB or discuss any perspectives for the future.

By my view, VAUB could have made a better use of this evaluation by discussing more openly the existing problems and challenges.

3.2 The Evaluation Visit

The institutional evaluation visit to the “Vasile Alecsandri” University in Bacău (VAUB) began in the evening of April 5, 2016, with the arrival of the ARACIS team at the Hotel Dumbrava in Bacău.

During the evaluation visit, I participated in the meetings of the main ARACIS team, but did also arrange my own interviews and examinations.

The official evaluation procedure started punctually on April 6 at 9:00 am, in the Aula next to the Rectorate of VAUB. Rector Prof.univ.dr.ing. Carol Schnakovsky, the President of the Senate and former Rector Prof.univ.dr.ing. Valentin Nedeff and the Vice-Rector and intermediate Rector Prof.univ.dr. Adriana-Gertruda Romedea welcomed the ARACIS delegation. The Mission Director Prof.univ.dr. Ladislau Nagy and the Mission Scientific Coordinator Prof.univ.dr. Călin Roșca presented the ARACIS team and explained the evaluation procedure.

In the course of the first day, the ARACIS team performed the usual activities. After a short internal ARACIS meeting in order to discuss the organisational details of the evaluation we visited for about 90 minutes buildings and installations at both campuses of VAUB (Central Library, Editura Alma Mater, TV and radio studios, several laboratories, faculty buildings, lecture rooms, sport facilities, canteen and student dormitories). We also met several on-going classes and observed staff and students working in the labs.

During the early afternoon I studied documents and had informative discussions with different members of the ARACIS team

In the late afternoon, I attended the meetings of the ARACIS team with about 150 students, with about 50 graduates and finally a meeting with 40 employers. As usual, these meetings with the huge groups of students, graduates and employers did not really disclose any severe problems. Students and graduates were commonly positive. The evaluation of teachers by students was considered as positive. The only expressed wish by the students was for more (financial) support for mobility programmes. In the meeting with the employers one person dominated the discussion asking the University for a more specialized education of students for his company.

Thursday, April 7,

In the morning I arranged meetings with the Rector Prof.univ.dr.ing. Carol Schnakovsky with the President of the Senate Prof.univ.dr.ing. Valentin Nedeff, with the General Administrative Director Ing. Ioan-Ciprian Drugă and with a group of eight students. The President of the Senate is the "grey eminence" of the institution. He was rector of the institution for two periods and is a very experienced university manager. It will be important for the new Rector to hold good relations with the President of the Senate, in order to make use of the experience of his predecessor and not to paralyze the institution. The General Administrative Director is also a very active person managing efficiently the administrative domain.

Also the students in the small group were all very positive on the institution.

Before lunch, I attended an ARACIS meeting with members of the Ethic Commission.

In the afternoon, I studied diverse documents in order to complete my impression of the institution.

Friday, April 8

In the morning, all Team members finalized their documents. The evaluation visit ended with a meeting of the ARACIS team with the representatives of VAUB at 10 am. Impressions and results of the evaluation visit were presented to the leaders of VAUB. Rector Prof.univ.dr.ing. Carol Schnakovsky thanked the ARACIS team for its careful work.

4. Governance and Institution

The leadership of the University is highly committed to the institution. The governing bodies at VAUB have developed a culture of consensus and co-operation, which makes it possible to govern the institution in an appropriate way. Similar to many other Romanian universities also VAUB has a favor for collective decisions. However, VAUB has already taken steps to reduce the administrative duties of academic teachers. So the recent reduction of the members of the Senate from 43 to 32 should be commended. But the number of five Vice-Rector for the institutions seems still to be very big.

The existence of a Strategic Plan 2012-2015 and an Operational Plan 2015 has to be commended. But in general, the strategic capacity of Romanian universities is restricted by the narrow scope of their autonomy. Moreover, the Operational Plan does not really set priorities and does not contain the necessary facts and indicators for the different goals in order to facilitate monitoring of progress.

The managers of VAUB are very well aware of the challenges of the future. Despite of the fact that Romanian universities generally suffer from a lack of institutional co-operation, the leaders of VAUB have started a discussion about possible co-operations with the private George Bacovia University, also situated in Bacău. A good deal with George Bacovia University could be aspirational for similar co-operations between state universities and private institutions in Romania.

Recommendations:

- Further simplify the organisational structure and review the number of Vice-Rectors.
- Clarify the role of the Senate and the Administrative Board in order to eliminate overlapping. Limit the function of the Senate to strategic planning, the definition of regulations for actions of the Administrative Board and the monitoring of the institution.
- Introduce benchmarks and performance indicators drawn from comparable institutions into the Strategic Plan. Define responsibilities, calculate costs, create monitoring instruments, etc., for the different tasks of the Operational Plan.
- The existence of an Ethic Commission has to be commended. But as I have already mentioned on other occasions, an ethic commission composed only by members from the institution will not be able to handle sensitive cases like corruption and academic misconduct. I strongly recommend to install – if necessary informally - an inter-university commission with half members coming from VAUB and the other half from other universities.

5. Quality Culture

VAUB has set up important activities and procedures for quality assurance. At central level there is a Vice-Rector responsible for quality assurance and there exists a Management Department for monitoring and for the provision of logistic support for carrying out processes. The Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance coordinates the implementation of procedures and activities of evaluation and quality assurance. All faculties have commissions for evaluation and quality assurance too. The students take an active part in the quality assurance procedures.

However, the organisation and procedures for quality assurance seem to be very bureaucratic and fragmented. This hinders the development of a real quality culture at VAUB.

Recommendations:

- Try to reduce bureaucratic efforts and avoid redundancies within quality assurance procedures.
- Promote the purpose and benefits of quality assurance procedures and shift from inspection and control to an improve-oriented approach providing support to staff and students.

6. Teaching and Learning

The quality of the education at VAUB was recognized in the meetings with employers, graduates and students. Neither the two meetings with students nor the meetings with graduates and employers disclosed any severe problems. As a regional university, it is important for VAUB to educate academics of a certain broadness in order to guarantee the flexibility of the graduates on the labour market.

The scheduled hour for the meeting with the employers was too short. The majority of the attending employers had no chance to give a statement on their relations with VAUB and experience with graduates.

There exist still some deficiencies with respect to the Bologna ideas (modularisation of programmes, shift to student centred education, more selective subjects, focus on employability, etc.). The involvement of stakeholders into curricula discussions seems to be informal and based on personal relations. Support services for students preparing them for the labour market (career centre, entrepreneurship, etc.) are not very active or do not exist.

Recommendations:

- Restrict the number of participants for the meeting with employers or give more time for this meeting.
- Increase the number of optional courses in programmes, fully modularise programmes and make better use of synergies.
- Increase autonomous student work and self-learning parts.
- Involve stakeholders systematically into curricula discussions.
- Increase assistance for students looking for an internship and strengthen the activities to facilitate the start of graduates into the working world.

7. Research and Service to Society

Research is not a very strong point at VAUB but there has been made progress to make research more visible. Research activities are coordinated by the Institute for Research, Development, Innovation, Consultancy, and Technological Transfer. But the University does not prioritise or organise special research topics. A large proportion of the research output is grown on individual initiatives. Co-operations with neighbouring universities and with regional and private actors in research and consulting activities are mainly based on personal contacts and not on institutional relationships.

Recommendations:

- Develop a research strategy based on clear priorities and already existing fields of excellence.
- Expand the co-operation with other research institutions (especially with George Bacovia University) in order to reach critical mass of research groups.
- Further increase visibility of research by intensifying international activities (e.g. participation in international research groups, publication in international recognised journals).
- Strengthen and extend relations with the region. Present examples of good research and consultancies to potential partners. Try to sign mutual contracts of co-operation in order to make income from collaborations sustainable.

8. Internationalisation

Internationalisation 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 activities of VAUB with respect to several of these aspects are not very extensive. According to the students the main handicap for mobility are financial problems.

Recommendations:

- Define clear goals for internationalisation (strategic partnerships, language policy, mobility, research collaborations).
- Promote internationalisation at home by offering elected courses in study programmes in English or French.
- Try to increase financial support for mobility.

9. Final Remarks

The "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău plays an important role in education and research for the North-East of Romania. The region needs a strong university for further cultural, social and economic development. VAUB has the potential to become a nationally and internationally recognised higher education institution. However, in order to cope with the threats and challenges of the future, VAUB has to proceed setting up an effective university management, reducing bureaucracy and establishing a clear and efficient organisational structure. My remarks and recommendations should assist VAUB to pursue a successful way into the future.

W. Müller

Winfried Müller
em.Univ.-Prof.Dr.Winfried Müller