

AGENȚIA ROMÂNĂ
DE ASIGURARE A CALITĂȚII
ÎN ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTUL SUPERIOR
FSE-POSDRU/2/1.2/S/1
Nr. 5430
Data: 05.06.2009

**External Institutional Evaluation
of the Ecological University of Bucharest**

Foreign Expert Report prepared for ARACIS
Romanian Quality Agency for Higher Education

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29 May 2009



Context

After the 1989 Revolution, like the rest of the Romanian political, economical and societal structures, the higher education system has undergone a series of major reforms designed to align it with other European higher education systems. During an initial period institutions developed as they could, that is with incomplete or even lacking legal framework, to meet an increasing demand for a diversified type of education. Public institutions struggled with a large increase in numbers, limited funding and lack of adequate guidelines; they could not meet all the demand, leaving a void which private institutions quickly tried to fill.

Rapidly the Government started providing a more detailed legal framework, with specific criteria for the functioning of higher education institutions. Thus the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation-CNEAA was established in 1993 to grant a first round of accreditation. As stated in the EUA¹ report on the evaluation of ARACIS “CNEAA was one of the earliest bodies of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe, and was intended to respond to the mushrooming of private higher education initiatives which had taken place in Romania in the early years of the post-communist period. The CNEAA criteria however were essentially of an input nature,..... CNEAA ceased its activities after adoption of the 2005 GEO and creation of ARACIS.”

In its report, EUA noted that “despite the many rapid and far reaching changes which Romanian higher education has undergone since 1990, a number of major challenges are still inherent in the system. These include factors linked to demographic developments, with a forecast reduction of 40% in the 18-25 year old age cohort between 2005 and 2020. A second system-wide challenge is the ever more rapid pace of labour market change, as Romania seeks to respond to globalisation and increased competition. These challenges, which involve an inevitable reduction in first time higher education learners, invite various policy responses, including the need for institutional differentiation and profiling and for an increase in focus on lifelong learning in its different forms, together with an increased focus on master and doctoral levels”.

Romania joined the Bologna process early in its development, in 1999. The process has given Romanian higher education opportunities to become well integrated in the European landscape, but at the same time has raised challenges to reform the structure and heighten the quality focus.

As part of its mission of accreditation and quality assurance in this challenging environment, ARACIS undertook the external evaluation of nearly 50 public and private institutions of higher education over a period of 3 years, 2007-09.

Each evaluation is conducted by a team which includes Romanian experts who verify that the evaluated institution complies with the national regulations and a foreign expert who provides a European outsider viewpoint on the overall functioning of that institution.

¹ EUA, EUA Audit of ARACIS, 2008

This is the overall context in which the evaluation of the Ecological University of Bucharest took place.

The Ecological University of Bucharest – UEB

UEB is the first private institution established in Romania after the 1989 revolution. The focus on ecology gives this institution an unusual profile very much in line with current global concerns; and it provides an initial answer to meet the challenges identified by EUA. Since its creation UEB has expanded gradually, but steadily, according to the 5-years statistics provided to this expert. It has moved from its original rented location to its own larger premises. Of its 6 faculties and one department, one is authorized (first step towards accreditation) and the others are accredited.

The current situation is thoroughly described in the self assessment report, mostly in relation to the various requirements that the Romanian legislation places on higher education. During the visit, the Romanian evaluation team members examined closely how these requirements are met; they give a detailed account in their report. From an outsider's view point several features deserve particular attention; they are reviewed below.

International outlook

To expand its collaboration network UEB has already established contacts, or partnerships, with other HEIs that have similar concerns in other countries, particularly in France with another ecology focused institution, and in Spain with a large Romanian immigrant population. UEB is involved in the Erasmus programme, and in other international programmes. It has joined a number of international associations (at least four are listed in the university brochure). UEB is active in organizing and in participating in international conferences.

It is obvious that UEB is already successfully active at an international level. If the university wishes to increase its capacity in this field and reach the level of a significant international player it will have to further develop some of its activities in this direction, such as:

- ***Expand the website.*** Nowadays the website is the first contact point for those who want to become acquainted with an institution before pursuing contacts. It is thus essential that the website be informative, thorough, up-to-date, easy to access and to navigate. The latter point means that the website should be fully set up in another language, at least in English, perhaps with links to other relevant sites such as government sites for country entry procedure and documents, housing facilities or agencies, students associations, etc. At the moment only very limited information is available in English. Examples of the type of information that could be added to the website are given below under "various points".

- **Highlight the special ecology focus and quality** in presentations and the documentation provided to outsiders. These should include examples of how the ecology focus pervades the education at UEB and examples of measures taken to insure high quality education.
- **Develop contacts:** examine the possibility to develop dual programmes, to co-organise events, with other institutions.
- **Join other wide based higher education associations** which offer opportunities for networking, sharing of information and best practices; for example: EUA-European University Association, EURASHE-European Association of Institutions of Higher Education, IMHE-the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education, EAIE-European Association for International Education; these are but a few of the many possibilities.
- **Establish an international office** of high visibility within the university, with a clearly identified person (pro-rector or dean) in charge.

Bologna Process

It is gratifying to see that UEB has already well implemented the Bologna process framework: the first two levels of the three-tier structure, ECTS, diploma supplement, are now well in place. However, as all are well aware, the Bologna process involves much more than a framework.

In the preamble of their communiqué of their meeting in Leuven, at the end of April 2009, the European Ministers of education stated “Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour [realizing a Europe of knowledge] if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education”². UEB is already on the way to meet the challenge through its efforts to accommodate the needs of a changing population: several forms of reduced frequency classes, launching distance education via e-learning. E-learning is indeed an essential form of delivery of education, commonly used in many European universities, and perhaps even more outside Europe. UEB is encouraged to contact other institutions experienced with e-learning to identify best practices in this field (see for example: Open Universities in particular Open University UK, Open University Catalunya – successful initiatives within institutions such as VSM in Slovakia). UEB is to be commended for its efforts. *At the same time it is recommended to make sure that these types of classes remain of the same quality level as those offered to on site full time students, and that they lead to degrees of the same value.*

At the close of the same meeting the Ministers stated “The objectives set out by the Bologna Declaration and the policies developed in the subsequent years are still valid today. Since not all the objectives have been completely achieved, the full and proper implementation of these

²Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009, accessed 27/05/09 on the Bologna website <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

objectives at European, national and institutional level will require increased momentum and commitment beyond 2010.” And they set a goal “Striving for excellence in all aspects of higher education, we address the challenges of the new era. This requires a constant focus on quality.”

Jean-Marc Rapp, Chairman of the EUA Governing Board, sees successful development in (among other recommendations) “Irrespective of institutional mission making sure that all universities: enhance quality and improve transparency, promote internationalization, increase and improve the quality of mobility, and develop partnerships for strengthening their various missions.”³

Therefore *it is recommended that the university reviews carefully what the Bologna objectives imply, and identify areas where further improvements can be achieved*, especially as regards defining learning outcomes (LO) and developing programmes based on LO, increasing mobility, and flexibility of studies or transdisciplinarity as a form of intra-university mobility.

Student Services

Students services in the form of records keeping, study and career counseling, availability of facilities, and others, are an essential part of the education provided. The other members of the evaluating team, in particular the students, are planning to comment more fully on these services; in addition these members will be able to relate their comments to the conditions in Romania. Therefore in the present report comments in this area will remain limited.

In terms of *facilities* UEB is fortunate to now own its buildings, which were built to the university specification. The buildings are modern, functional, nicely lit and welcoming. They provide enough classroom space. The library is adequate, but should continue to expand both to make more paper or electronic titles available, and to offer more reading stations to students, especially if there are few study rooms. At present there are two main drawbacks to the current set up. First the university does not provide housing nor dining facilities. This is a major handicap. The university is well aware of the negative consequences of this problem; building more facilities is among the top priorities for further improvement. *It is hoped that opportunities, and funding, will soon come up so that UEB can establish a full campus and welcome more students in improved environment.* Secondly, because of urban improvement going on, UEB is surrounded by construction sites, complicating access to the already small campus, some accesses are actually dangerous. Clearly UEB has absolutely no control over this situation and very limited occasions to influence it. Nonetheless, because of the risks for students and staff alike, UEB is urged to *continue using all its limited means* through its contacts with the municipal authorities *to obtain at least temporary measures for safer access.*

³ Jean-Marc Rapp, *Preliminary Results from the Trends 2010 Survey*, accessed on the Bologna website (see note 2).

Newer generations of *computers* seem to be available for staff and students in many rooms, gradually replacing older ones. Information technology has become an essential vehicle for education. This important role will only increase with time, especially, for EUB, when e-learning becomes a common mode of providing education in this institution. In addition, more and more students have their own computers. In some HEIs in other countries students are even required to bring their own computer with them to the university. Of course it is not implied that UEB should come to that extreme position, but it could facilitate the process of IT dissemination by *providing free wifi access in all its buildings*.

UEB should be commended for the usually relaxed and open atmosphere that seems to prevail. The students who took part in a meeting with the visiting team seemed to express their thoughts freely, and these were mostly positive. However, it seems that communication does not flow smoothly, or efficiently enough, between administrative services and students. There was no time to explore this issue further during the visit but *it is recommended that management looks into it, in collaboration with the students, and tries to find ways to improve communication*.

Additional Various Points

The following observations could be related to management, internationalization, public relations, or Bologna process, but they all bear on quality, a constant preoccupation for educators.

The involvement of students in a number of instances, as required by law, and procedures such as feedback on courses is a positive step in the direction recommended by the Bologna Process. What is even more positive is the fact that the students themselves acknowledge that they are included in the governing and the quality assurance processes **and** that their opinion is taken into account. However, the university could go even further *and involve student representation in all instances*, whether of a management or academic nature. This measure would send a strong signal to the entire university community that its various components work well together towards the common goal of quality education and research.

If understood correctly, as in other European countries, Romanian higher education has now embarked on a process of periodic evaluations by ARACIS to ensure that basic requirements are met and that quality improves continuously. This process could also contribute to reinforce the institution's image in the country. To make the most of this process and use it as a factor of growth UEB could *further develop its self assessment procedure* by, for example: setting up in each faculty groups in charge of quality assurance and self assessment, that would involve in depth discussion of the various aspects being evaluated, and would deliver reports that are both analytical and critical; a thorough SWOT type analysis could be useful too. It is important to realize that *the main beneficiary of such an analytical process is the institution itself*.

As already mentioned above under internationalization the university could further improve its communication with its internal community as well as with the wider environment by *developing* even more its already well documented *website*: highlight the institution's

specific profile, its mission statement, its priorities, provide more information on the management and governance of the institution, list the various commissions and their functions, provide a section for students activities, update information regularly about internal events as well as events involving outsiders, include the brochures now available on paper, and so on. An expanded website would serve UEB's image well.

Conclusions

UEB offers a distinctive specific profile with its focus on ecology. This university is now well established and recognized in the Romanian and the wider European academic environment. As part of this recognition it is now aiming to extend its education offer to the doctorate level. Feedback from employers indicates that its graduates have received a solid education which is valued on the labour market. These are all positive aspects about UEB.

One of the many strong points is the flexibility of education offer, aiming to adapt to the needs of a changing student population by means of reduced frequency classes and e-learning. UEB is benefiting there from being a relatively young and not so large institution: it can react and adapt more quickly. It is therefore quite positive that UEB intends to remain a medium size institution by limiting the increase in student numbers.

In other parts of this brief report from an outsider, specific suggestions were presented to continue improving the education offer. These can be summed up in the following overall recommendations: *capitalize on the distinctive ecology focus, continue reaching out at international level but strengthen the image in Romania as well, above all keep a focus on quality in all areas of the university functioning.*

As a personal addendum I wish to express my profound gratitude to the leaders, all the staff and students of the Ecological University of Bucharest for the open minded and generous hospitality they offered me. I trust that UEB will continue to provide high quality education to many students in the future, and will contribute to the development of the knowledge base in Romania.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Smith', with a horizontal line underneath it.