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Concerning: Report of the Foreign Expert Winfried Müller

Dear Mrs. Sarbu;

Enclosed you find my report on the External ARACIS-Evaluation of the University „Politehnica” of Timișoara.

Thank you very much for all your assistance and help.

Many greetings from Klagenfurt

Winfried Müller

Enclosed: Report

External ARACIS-Evaluation of the University „Politehnica” of Timișoara

Report of the Foreign Expert Winfried Müller

1. Introduction

When the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ARACIS) received the application of the University „Politehnica” of Timișoara (UPT) for an External Institutional Evaluation Prof.univ.dr.ing. Mihai Octavian Popescu from the University „Politehnica” of București was assigned as Mission Director and Prof.univ.Dr.ing. Simona Lache from the University “Transilvania” of Brașov as Mission Coordinating Person. The Contact Person at UPT was Prof.univ.dr.ing. Toma Leonida Dragomir. On invitation of ARACIS the European University Association (EUA) nominated Univ.-Prof.Dr. Winfried Müller as Foreign Expert to participate in this evaluation.

In May 2009, after UPT had provided the Internal Institutional Self Evaluation Report (IISER), the Mission Coordinating Person informed me on a preliminary schedule for the evaluation visit to UPT planned for June 24 to 26 of 2009. In preparation for the visit I had several very fruitful discussions by e-mail and by phone with Prof. Lache and Prof. Dragomir in order to clarify and specify several points of the visit. In the following a slightly modified and extended schedule for the visit was established.

I am very grateful to the Mission Coordinating Person Prof. Lache for her open und friendly answers to my questions und suggestions. She conducted the whole evaluation process in a superior way and was very engaged to answer all my requests. I also want to thank the UPT Contact Person Prof. Dragomir for his perfect organization before and during the visit and to UPT for its generous hospitality. Furthermore, I want to express my appreciation to all members and the various groups of UPT, who have actively participated in the meetings and considerably contributed by their open discussions to form a clear view of UPT. Last but not least my thanks go to Mrs. Oana Sarbu from the ARACIS Experts Department for her friendly way of holding contact with me and providing all the necessary information and to the Mission Director Prof. Mihai Popescu for the conscientious direction of this evaluation.

2. Contextual Framework of the Foreign Expert’s Report

Since ARACIS may not know my background I will describe briefly the vantage point from which I write this review. I have already more than 8 years of experience as peer with the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of EUA. The IEP has a strong emphasis on the self-evaluation process within the evaluated institution. IEP evaluations are undertaken from an European and international perspective and the key question is the institution’s capacity for improvement and change in order to face the current challenges of higher education. It has to

be marked that IEP does not rank nor accreditate study programmes or institutions. In difference, ARACIS evaluations take place in correspondence with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and have their focus in the evaluation of study programmes. Hence, some of the following comments and recommendations will reflect my IEP-background.

3. Organizational Details of UPT

UTP was established in 1920 and belongs to the national education systems of Romania. Consequently it is a legal person and has university autonomy according to the Law of Education in Romania and its own University Charter. The highest decision body is the Senate chaired by the Rector. The Executive Board of the Senate consisting of the rector, the three vice-rectors, the scientific secretary, the general managing director and one representative of the students manages UPT. The University is structured in 10 faculties, 5 independent departments and one independent chair. Besides the ending old study programmes UPT offers about 38 Bachelor-, 42 Master- and Doctoral-programmes linked to all Faculties in correspondence with the Bologna structure. Actually more than 15000 students are enrolled.

UPT's mission is described as

- initial and permanent training at graduate and postgraduate level in engineering, interdisciplinary and complementary domains;
- scientific and technological research;
- scientific transfer of technology and know-how, production and specific services.

UPT owns more than 90 buildings and has recently realized many rehabilitation projects and updatings. The buildings, lecture rooms and labs visited by the evaluation team were all of very high standard. Only the library, where a new building is under construction, is not accommodated adequately at the moment.

4. General Observations

The 48 pages (including covers and list of annexes) IISER provided by UPT was of remarkable quality and gave a full description of the institution and its development over the last years. According to the ARACIS procedure the focus of the report was on teaching and the teaching infrastructure of UPT. The IISER was produced by a self evaluation team chaired by the Rector Prof.Dr.eng. Nicolae Robu and the Contact Person Prof.Dr.eng. Toma-Leonida Dragomir.

The visit of the ARACIS evaluation team to UPT took place from June 24 to 26, 2009.

In the evening of June 23 the evaluation team met with university representatives for a working dinner in order to get to know each other and discuss some details of the evaluation.

The official procedure started on June 24 with the opening meeting of the evaluation team with the university board, the coordinators of the evaluated study programmes and students representatives. After this meeting the evaluation team splitted into two groups. One part of the evaluation team was occupied with the evaluation of study programmes, the other part of the team was concerned with the institutional evaluation of UPT. I joined the institutional evaluation group. This group had the opportunity discussing the situation of UPT with the leaders of the institution, with staff members, with students and with stakeholders.

A meeting with members of the Senate Board, Deans of the Faculties and members of the Senate was followed by a meeting with researchers, doctoral students and representatives of the staff union. A visit to different buildings and installations of UPT concluded the morning session on June 24. The afternoon session started with a meeting with representatives of selected Research Centres, the Department for Staff Preparation, the Continuing Education Department, International Programmes and Relations Department, Information and Counselling Centre for Students and the University Library. A meeting with student representatives concluded the interviews on day one.

June 25 was started by a meeting with members of the Quality Assurance Department. Afterwards I had the opportunity to visit the Department of Mathematics.

In the afternoon of June 25 a meeting of the evaluation team with graduates followed by a meeting with employers took place.

The official visit ended on June 26 at lunch time by a meeting of the evaluation team with the University Board. In the afternoon of June 26, the Rector Prof.Dr.ing. Nicolae Robu returned from abroad and met the Mission Director, the Mission Coordinating Person, the Foreign Expert and other team members for a short interchange of views.

5. ARACIS Approach

The ARACIS evaluation procedure follows the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (QA) defined by ENQA. Hence the focus of the evaluation lies in the study programmes. The ARACIS evaluation of Rumanian universities is an important step to QA. The procedure is well designed and very qualified peers are on duty. But many formal facts and qualifications have to be checked which leads to a bureaucracy not adequate for high quality institutions with a long history like UPT. Instead of interchanging observations and findings within the evaluation team too much time is wasted checking formal data between single peers and coordinators of study programmes. Maybe, some of these checks could be done also prior to the visit. Anyhow, these checks cannot go into details and stay more or less on the surface because within one short visit to the institution it is not possible to study details of courses, examinations and failure rates, to talk to students, graduates, employers, to visit buildings etc. Hence the ARACIS evaluation of study programmes certainly is a first

important step to assure quality in higher education institutions, but cannot guaranty quality of education if the peers are not informed honestly.

Recommendations:

- The groups met for interviews were far too big. (At some meetings we were about 70 people.) A discussion of 10 to 20 peers with about 30 university people cannot go into detail and will never disclose weaknesses. In order to gain better information from the interviews form smaller groups for meetings and try to create a private atmosphere between team members and university representatives.
- The IISER was kept confidential within the self evaluation group and not known to many members of UPT. Keeping confidential the IISER means to miss the unique chance to start a discussion within the institution on its identity and further developments involving the opinion leaders of the university. As I have already mentioned, the self evaluation process could be the most important part of the evaluation procedure which could start a very positive and effective development within the university. Elaborating the IISER only as a duty for an external evaluation means a waste of time and losing a big chance.
- ARACIS should try to make more profit out of its evaluations by encouraging institutions to be more self-critical in the IISER and to mention problems too. So UPT could have mentioned in its IISER the problem of maintenance more than 90 buildings, what is really a challenge. The IISER should not be focused only on teaching and give a wider description of the whole institution. UPT could have also mentioned the exact staff numbers and the annual budget in the main part of IISER and not only within the numerous annexes. E.g. the ratios of teachers and students in different areas would have been interesting.
- The knowledge of the self evaluation group on the institution should be used after the evaluation in order to form a task force for the strategic planning and an advisory group for the governing bodies of the university.

6. Teaching

All study programmes of UPT have changed to the three cycle Bologna system. The existing old programmes are terminating. The quality of the courses is generally recognized. Teachers and students are highly motivated. I had the opportunity to take a closer look to the bachelor study programme "Mecatroniã și Roboticã" which is also offered totally in German language. I can state that this programme is of high international standard and the teaching staff involved is of high level.

The change to the Bologna system has been realized in an efficient and successful way. Nevertheless, there seems to be necessary a second step of adaptation. I have observed the following problems:

- students mention that the curricula should pay more attention to practical work;
- in some carriers there are too many projects in parallel, none of the projects being really profound;
- some study programmes seem to be overloaded because of the fact that former programmes of 5 years have been pressed into 4 years without changing the number and content of subjects. Autonomous student work and self learning parts should be increased. Even the stakeholders mention a lack of understanding with respect to the new structure and had doubts on the employability of the new bachelors.
- UPT seems not to have a clear language policy. Nowadays English is the international language also in engineering disciplines. Hence I recommend to offer and require English courses in all study programmes and to try including English speaking teachers in order to enforce internationalization and mobility of students and teachers.

Recommendation: Evaluate the new bachelor-programmes after you have gained first experiences and develop the programmes further with respect to employability and internationalization.

7. Research

The research report of UPT is impressive. There exist several internationally recognized research groups and research personalities within UPT. Nevertheless, I have the impression that there is no clear research policy. Though UPT's mission statement and strategic plan mention some research directions, these papers seem to be very general. In order to make the research at UPT internationally more visible it should be more focused and interdisciplinary research should be enforced. During the interviews there were comments that European trends and necessities of the Romanian society did not really influence the research policy of UPT nor of individual researchers at UPT. This contradicts somehow the mission statement of the University. On the other hand it was mentioned that research was nearly the only criterion for staff promotion. On long term this could have a negative effect on the quality of teaching.

Recommendation: Develop a clear research policy for UPT and create "seed money" for interdisciplinary research and research in the interest of the Romanian society and along European lines.

8. Institution

The QU-Department of UPT is well established and does good work. Student evaluation of courses, development for administrative and academic staff – at least in the lower categories – are well introduced. However, there seems to be no clear policy for pedagogical training or it-training of higher teaching staff such as professors.

UPT has a strategic plan and other development documents. But as the governing bodies of UPT are very big – the Senate has more than 70 members - one has the impression that many planning papers reflect only the “greatest common divisor of the different parts of UPT” the decision body was able to agree. The management system of UPT seems to be over-democratized in some aspects. As a consequence there seems to be a lack of sharp strategic plans combined with action plans and periodical evaluations of realizations.

Recommendations:

- Form a Senate and other governing bodies with a reasonable number of members in order to be able to precise the profile of UPT and formulate a clear vision of UPT's future.
- Try to be a leader within the Romanian university scene and be more pro-active in developing new study fields required by the modern society and in promoting new research fields. (As an educated mathematician I would like to give you one example for being pro-active concerning my discipline: Why do you not start a study programme “Technical Mathematics” at UPT? In Europe there is a growing demand for applied mathematicians who are able to solve difficult problems linked with the development of new IT-applications in many fields of our modern society. So the rector of the University of Barcelona, one of the greatest European universities in one of the richest European regions made the following statement on occasion of the opening of the academic year 07/08: “Society should acknowledge the presence of mathematics at the very basis of Nature, Science, Technology and Art, and should be aware how important it is to have a group of well-trained mathematicians able to develop capacities of analysis and abstraction, intuition, and logical and rigorous thought.” UPT could be the first university of technology in Romania offering an education in technical mathematics.
- Strengthen your relations to the local and regional authorities in order to have your activities in education and research better recognized. This could open you new sources of income and give you more influence on the regional development. A university like UPT is a treasure for a city and region.

9. Final Remark

The ACACIS external institutional evaluations serve an important task and play an important role for quality assurance in higher education in Romania. The procedure is well designed and works with excellent peers.

UPT can be optimistic about its future. I want to encourage the University to take its future firmly in its own hand and to meet its challenges in order to advance society.

July 8, 2009

Univ.-Prof.Dr. Winfried Müller