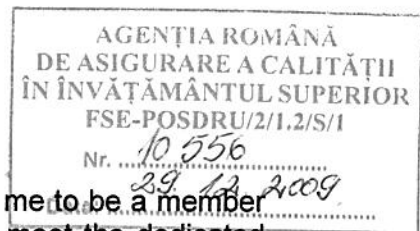# EVALUATION REPORT - NATIONAL SCHOOL of POLITICAL STUDIES and PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION of BUCHAREST

Written by the short –term foreign expert: Teréz Kleisz Phd

First, I would like to express my thanks to ARACIS for selecting me to be a member of the evaluation committee. I have appreciated the chance to meet the dedicated members of the academic staff and university leadership and management and to explore their qualitative work. Excellent young colleagues from the National School provided translation for me throughout my visit; they helped me with interviewing students and staff members and they kept me informed about the content of plenary meetings and group sessions. I really valued the attentive care and friendly hospitality which I was fortunate enough to enjoy.

- **The efficiency of the institutional procedures of programme quality assurance.**

Mission, Values and Competitiveness:

The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration was launched 19 years ago with the intention to educate a new breed of high quality professionals. The institute's own particular identity has been carved simultaneously with the new political democratic phase in Romania's history. The institution is very committed to serve the transformation of Romanian society through knowledge creation. It aims to generate a "greater public good" by providing research-based and practice-based higher education that will prepare learners for future careers, and even leadership roles. Having talked to a lot of academics and students there it was obvious to me that the university community aspires to build an institution of elite (that is top quality) education, and to win recognition and achieve visibility in Romania and beyond.

This public university does have an Ethic Commission whose Code of Ethics emphasizes a raft of salient values : freedom of expression for academics, quest for truth in research and open publicity of the results, critical thinking, intellectual partnership and cooperation regardless of political opinions or religious beliefs, the principle of non-discrimination and equal opportunities for all students.

Several professors I talked with, stressed the importance of the university's function in fostering public debates on relevant social issues, acting in the role of a public intellectual and educating students to informed citizenship.

The National School offers its degrees in varied and flexible forms. It started by offering MA level education only. Since 1995 BA programmes have been offered, and after 2000 it was possible to undertake doctoral studies too . Apart from the full-time student population a large number of part-time students enroll. These are students who are already in full-time paid employment. MA courses begin at 5 p.m and run until 9 p.m. At present the National School offers day, distance or distance in online system- types of education. Distance –learning centres are operated in Constanta, Iasi, Cluj-Napoca, Craiova and Brasov.

The number of students in 2008/2009 school year was 12, 475.

The university is self-financed in proportion of 63%. (2008).

The University policy to address lifelong learning challenges seems to be working well : online courses and distant learning programs have been provided since 1999. Both BA and MA degrees are offered to learners in this form. In the last 3 years academic programs entirely in English languages were developed. The university has been growing at a constant rate, and a range of new and relevant study programmes and new approaches to teaching have been introduced which show the level of responsiveness to the needs of the nation-state and of the internationalization. The number of faculties and joint MA programmes are on the increase.

In the fields of curriculum development and evaluation the university has developed a wide network of partnerships with foreign specialists and institutions. University of Strasbourg, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, University of Athens, University of Wien, EUC NORD Denmark, European Public Law Organisation, EAPAA and Union Institute of the US were mentioned as relevant contributors. Student evaluations and student opinions are taken seriously.

The institution fully embraced the initiatives of Bologna Process, applied the three-cycle degree system and elaborated the common qualification framework. It operates quality assurance procedures, values partnerships and seeks to promote transnational cooperation and mobility.

Each year each faculty (Faculty of Political Science, Faculty of Public Administration, Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, Faculty of Management) has to organise at least one international conference and present research results. All the papers presented must have a reviewed publication.

Another requirement since 2008: Each faculty should publish a piece of bilingual professional literature (one of them should be in an internationally used language) registered in international databases.

The Faculty of Communication operates a publishing house (Communicare.ro Publishing House) that has CNCSIS accreditation and published numerous works of the academic staff and other authors.

One year ago the office of President was established , following a referendum where 65% of the eligible staff members voted and a 95% majority voted in favour of the new position. The President's role was discussed, some thought it needs more clarification, but others agreed that in spite of certain inconsistencies the role may strengthen the doctoral schools and the research-aspect of the university.

The Supervisors' Board of the Doctoral Program involves all the professors of the university and their collective engagement is beneficial for the quality of the doctoral students. Some professors did get the right to supervise doctoral students at foreign universities.

Students in the four doctoral programs enjoy a kind of back-up support that creates opportunities for them to be engaged in international projects and to build professional contacts. Doctoral students involved in the project *"For the Better Doctoral Programmes"* (funded by the EU Structural Fund) agreed to reach the quality indicators pursued by the university framework as well.

The institution created several Research Centres as a sort of laboratory, featuring the collaborative partnerships of professors and Phd- students. The Research Centres are requested to identify and develop reliable programs on an international

scale and the goal is to achieve " National Centre for Excellence" status by 2012. The research activities are supported by ensuring equipment and software licenses.

In the year 2008 33 research projects were submitted for funding and 25 of them were awarded. One year before (2007) out of 29 projects submitted 20 were successful in attracting resources.

The research teams and individual researchers are obliged (according to the Ethical Code)to accept the peer-review system for all research products presented publicly.

At managerial level a Special Office for Research was formed to target the EU Structural Fund and to coordinate the stages of writing and submitting proposals.

Academic competitiveness seems to be in a healthy state as research funding shows.

- **The efficiency of the institutional procedures of ensuring graduation standards.**

Access:
There is a policy for broadening access reflecting social diversity ;
Roma students from families with no tradition of higher education, Romanians living in Moldova Republic or in Ukraine, and students whose parents are members of the teaching community in public schools are positively discriminated according to a national policy measure. (no entrance fees, no accommodation costs) .
70 % of scholarship should be given on a social basis. It is granted to students whose parents fit into the category "Fighters for the Victory of the Roman Revolution of December 1989", orphans , students with certain types of illnesses and those coming from low-income families.
There are three forms of scholarships: merit scholarship, study scholarship and social aid scholarship.
The National School still does have a selection procedure was evaluated by several staff members and graduates as worth doing and well-functioning. A knowledge testing in one of three disciplines is needed for an admission to BA, an oral interview and a paper on a free choice topic is required for the MA.

The university has a regulation regarding the examining and grading of students, which is applied rigorously and consistently.

Enhancing employability : The Career Guidance and Counselling Centre, shaped and run by students, functions as a valued student support system. Former and present students were very appreciative of the weekend-trainings that developed their skills to perform well in a job-interview. Each year the survey results taken among the graduates' employment experiences are built into the university' s initiatives to increase contact with the job market.

Investing in relevant field-practice, i.e. internship-offerings (at present at least 2 weeks a year= 80 hours= 3credits) was seen by both the former graduates and employers as a key asset of the National School. The Faculty of Political Sciences has field practice contracts with high profile political institutions like the Parliament, the Romanian Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The academic staff maintain good contacts with practitioners in the field of political and business communication, and in other areas of public life. Each year

conferences are organized with the aim of enriching the relationships between staff, students and practitioners. I was interested to see that the category "associate professor" represents not only an academic title, but identifies that sort of a staff member who is a practitioner and a professor simultaneously. Their role was mainly focused on constantly reviewing and evaluating the content of courses as they serve as bridges between the university and the real world.

One way of measuring the quality of graduates is to see how well their skills enable them to adapt to diverse situations. According to the employers the graduates perform well on this dimension. In our meeting, employers agreed that recent graduates are capable of critical approaches to a given topic, and show a considerable degree of responsibility but they lack "endurance" and seem to demand lucrative positions. Companies offer and help to select thesis-themes.

Former graduates expressed the opinion that graduating from the National School has proved prestigious for them and the competences they had acquired enabled them to get high profile jobs in the capital.

- **The efficiency of the institutional procedures of supporting the educational process.**

Composition of the teaching staff.

I found a good mix of very experienced, well-known professors and young lecturers. A lot of former bright students who excelled in research were selected to join the staff. Young staff members (for example at the Faculty of Communication more than half of the academics are under 35) are getting support from the faculty boards to attend international forums, summer schools, and training within the framework of professional continuing education. Young mothers coming back from their maternal leave described the atmosphere as "family-supportive." To my mind these are good examples of investment in the young generation of teacher-researchers.

The academics are well qualified : 70 % of them have a Phd- title, the institutional target is 90 % by 2012. University professors and senior lecturers comprise 44,9% of the teaching staff in 2008/2009. The professional continuing education of the staff is a goal in the Strategy Plan.

A multi-criteria annual evaluation form does exist on each member of academic staff, and this forms a basis for promotion. The National School expressis verbis declared in its Strategical Plan 2008-2012 that applicants for admission into the academic community have to go through a formal recruitment procedure, involving contest and competition. Both teaching and research are required elements of the job - they cannot be separated.

The staff is required to develop teaching material for distance learning students for all the courses they teach.

Students are seen as partners in the educational process. Minimum 2 hours a week from teachers are assigned for academic counselling.

Being a middle –sized university (12-13 thousand students; 1 teacher/ 19 daily education students) has produced very good interpersonal relations between the lecturers and the students : the sense of belonging to the National School's "community" was palpable even for the short time I had a chance to observe.

Transnational exchanges involving academics and students gained a new impetus with joining the EU. The National School has successfully built partnerships with EU universities.

- **The internal evaluation results of the study programmes' quality.**

The study programs fulfil the criteria of the internal regulation on initiation, approval, monitoring and periodical evaluation which guarantees unity of procedures and common standards. The study programs respond to the ARACIS criteria. The ECTS system is applied as well. There is a constant monitoring and getting feedback both from staff and students.

Students' evaluations were very favourable : they rated the quality of programs at an average score of 9 on a scale of 1-10 (when 10 is the best).

The University Charter stresses the right of the students to represent and be represented (in a proportion of ¼ of students in day teaching). The student representatives in the Senate emphasized the importance of the evaluation questionnaires on courses and the transnational mobilities that give an opportunity for comparison of study programmes and therefore stimulate course development.

Learner-centered perspective : Former graduates really valued the personalized teaching methods of the professors, they expressed their thanks that lecturers always made time for their personal and professional development.

A relatively new university regulation requires 50% of attendance even for those students who work as well – according to a 2008 survey the majority of students accepted this rule without any problem.

- **The students' use of the academic infrastructure**

Learning environment: At present the main campus environment offers limited space for learning : the relative lack of classrooms and library facilities is a fact and the leisure infrastructure needs improving as well.

The students I met in the dormitories were satisfied with the living arrangements but in my judgement the older buildings offer very cramped accommodation (4 persons in a room), especially compared to western standards which may pose a problem when the number of incoming Erasmus-students will rise.

At present 532 is the accommodation capacity (11,6 % of daily education students.)

At present 427 PC-s are available to staff and students. The students can use the PCs 12 hours a day. The students have access to over 80 percent of overall PCs, with a general ratio of 10 students per PC and a use ratio of 2 students per PC. The National School grants access to Jstor and EBSCO databases.

Both students and staff seem to miss smaller, cosy spaces for tutorials enabling small groups to meet informally in a workshop fashion.

Moving to the new headquarter next year is going to cure the problem of library and space. The strategy of offering a lot of e-books and journals, databases and software for the students and staff has proved to be a very good one, and compensated for the current deficiencies. Those involved in distance learning were appreciative of the e-learning platforms.

Sport facilities seem to be very limited as well. Students expressed their will to develop the spaces for extracurricular activities.

The utility of the self-evaluation documents in illustrating the institution's capacity to reflect its own possibilities and limits and the way to manage them in order to enforce quality and graduation standards.

I got the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report in English and some other documents (for example The Strategy Plan 2008-2012) were translated for me personally. I was very satisfied with the detailed information. The statements on strategic priorities, goal settings, structures were supported by data, and I could see the evidence-based approach of the document. However, the sizeable number of appendices were not translated into English, therefore I did not have chance to read those and substantiate the written goals and benchmarks.

To my mind the university has created an internal quality culture lately. A very favourable regulating framework, and an efficient and transparent internal structure exists within the institution. A *Commission for Quality Assurance* was established in 2005 with the task of approval and evaluating the academic programmes and shaping and implementing quality assurance policies. So far 15 BA and MA Programs were scrutinized and validated by them.

My impression was that the academics working in the commission and the key persons in the management levels collaborate very efficiently, and the harnessing of quality issues seems to work as a horizontal mainstreaming in the institution.

11 staff member participated in a special training run by ARACIS to acquire advanced skills of internal evaluators. (Within the framwork: Quality Assurance in the Romanian Higher Education in European Context. Academic Management Quality Development at Systemic and Institutional Level-May 2009).

There are quality assurance committees at faculty level as well. These bodies were very active in formulating a *Strategic Plan of Quality Assurance* approved in 2008 that prescribes certain objectives to reach by a given time. (ratio of Phd degree holders among teaching staff should be 90 %; admission standards; evaluation fo students' competetences; graduation quota; employment quota – i.e. process and outcome indicators.)

It was obvious from the Self-evaluation Report that the criteria concerning an appointment or promotion of full time professors and associate professors are stricter at the National School than the MECI requirements.

- **The credibility of the information disseminated by the institution with regard to the study programmes.**

I have had a chance to read the information brochures targeting international students in English. The Counselling and Guidance Service showed me several flyers and the website they operate, and I found them well- designed and information rich.

The National School promotes a policy of openness towards society.

The main website (www.snspa.ro) gives detailed information on the mission of the university, the organogram of the institution, the study and research programs, degrees offered, links to the faculty websites and on the admission requirements. Students can get information on assignable credits, the university year's structure, on the fees and scholarships, on the Counselling and Guidance Service.

The academic advertising to the potential students is emphasizing both the university and the distinct educational offer of each faculty.

According to internal regulation the themes and bibliography for entrance examinations have to be published 6 months prior to the examination day and advertised on websites, on media by academic advertising documents.

All students should be informed on course and examination requirements – the Strategic Plan 2008-2012 stipulates this.

Transparency is a policy at the National School. For instance the self-evaluation report on research activities was also posted on the institutional website.

- **Good practice aspects**

  - I was particularly impressed by the e- database on the performance of the academics that gives an up-to-date information to the management (as the academics record themselves their achievements in the following areas: Publications; Contracts (research and consultancy); Projects (succesful applications and submitted ones); Research activity indicators (ISI citations); Prospective studies/products; Models, methodologies; Membership in editorial boards of international and national journals; International Awards, Romanian Academy Awards; Disciplines (courses taught); Personal information.

    Only certain authorized people can have an access to the data but they are able to use this professional track record when needed promptly and accurately. The same criteria is used for granting academic titles in the university. So the system operates for continuous evaluation, monitoring and promotion as well. It is not only a management technique of control but works as a transparent framework informing the staff on institutional expectations and motivating them to excell.

  - The yearly organised practitioners-academics- current students conferences seem to be very effective in terms of both strengthening the links with labour market and generating good internships via former students.

  - The Counselling and Guidance Centre (run by 2 lecturers and 25 volunteers) provides a quality support both in professional and academic areas for the students. (Interestingly the missing " psychological counselling"-part was seen by the activists as not part of the Romanian culture, thus not demanded). The

activities of the Centre (tutorial programs, trainings, social and cultural events, data-gathering and information processing) serve the student community very well. Promoting the services would profit from the new WEBpage currently in building.

- I liked the fact that the Chairs can give smaller research grants to students pursuing an interesting theme.

- **Statement related to the confidence granted to the institution**

I propose a "high degree of confidence" grade.

I found the university to be capable of the kind of self-reflection that results in transformed procedures, and in strategies based upon joint planning by staff, students and partners which in turn creates a culture of innovation and quality. The institution consciously strives for excellence, a lot of performance indicators have been invented and constantly used both in planning and implementation.

- **Recommendations for the institution's activity**

-To go on with the constant improvement of the dormitory-area, upgrading the facilities to give more space for individualized living, enhance attractiveness for the foreign students who are used to have more privacy and individual choices when living in dormitories. Sport facilities, green areas, public spheres, internet connections at the rooms, access to virtual libraries, more equipped kitchens, and internal travel support services (between campuses, dormitories) are needed.

Students suggested that online evaluations sheets on courses should be used instead of teacher-disseminated ones. Some follow-up would be advisable whether there are modifications next year.

-The ERASMUS scholarship (300 euros/month) is not substantial enough, could be an obstacle to mobility. The students would need more options to generate sponsorship contracts. I found it startling that companies where the students' parents work are willing to contribute to the scholarships. This situation may not give fair chances to everyone.

Encouraging sport and leisure participation of the students via creating attractive sport facilities.

Student- friendly support structures have to be broadened and developed. (in the area of the administrative units dealing with students' issues as well).

To broaden the existing faculty alumni programs to the level of the whole university and create adequate forms of cooperation for the sake of feed-back and responsiveness, not to speak of university-enterprise collaboration, drawing in more private funds.

I have seen no mention in the university documents on the issue of Validation of Prior Learning. This seems to be on the European agenda, and I suggest the University addresses the matter.

Broaden LLL agenda and create post-retirement opportunities for cultural enrichments.

- **Recommendation to ARACIS**

Organizing the meeting with the employers could not be done in any other way than by inviting those who do maintain a good partnership with the faculties of the university. (70-80 % were former graduates). Thus the evaluation will/may sway to the very positive angle. More varied forms of evaluation should be developed.